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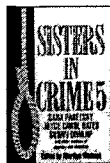
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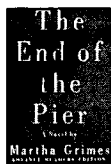
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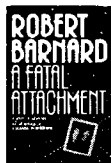
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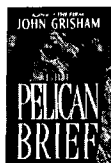
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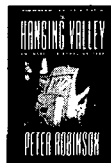
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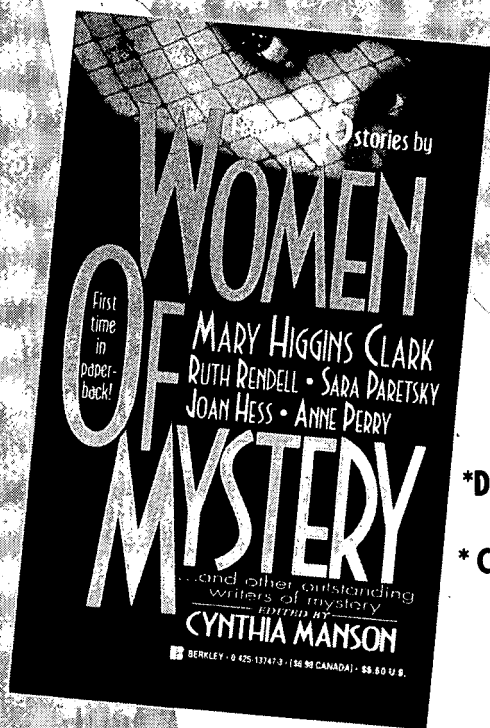
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Some of you (many of you, we hope) will remember the first saga of Bobby Darling, in Sybil Baker's "A Little Publicity Never Hurts," the cover story in our August, 1992, issue. On the set of a live television drama, longtime leading man Gerald Manley is poisoned, and Bobby Darling, in his first TV role, gets himself suspected.

But Bobby didn't do it. And that's all we found out in that first story.

Now, a year later, we're going to get to the bottom of this. In an equally delightful tale, "The Tea-V Murder," Ms. Baker (and Bobby) track the killer down.

We hope you enjoy this sequel as much as we did. For

those who missed the first story—not to worry. This one stands on its own.

It's Edgar time again—that springtime event in New York when awards are presented by the Mystery Writers of America for crime and mystery fiction and nonfiction, movies and television. This year's Grand Master is Donald E. Westlake; the Reader of the Year Award went to President Bill Clinton, a self-declared mystery fan; and the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story went to Stephen Saylor for "A Will Is a Way" (EQMM, March, 1992). The complete list of nominees and winners follows, with the winners in boldface type.

(continued on page 156)

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FICTION

Sheriff Stone Pays a Call

by Wendy
Almeida

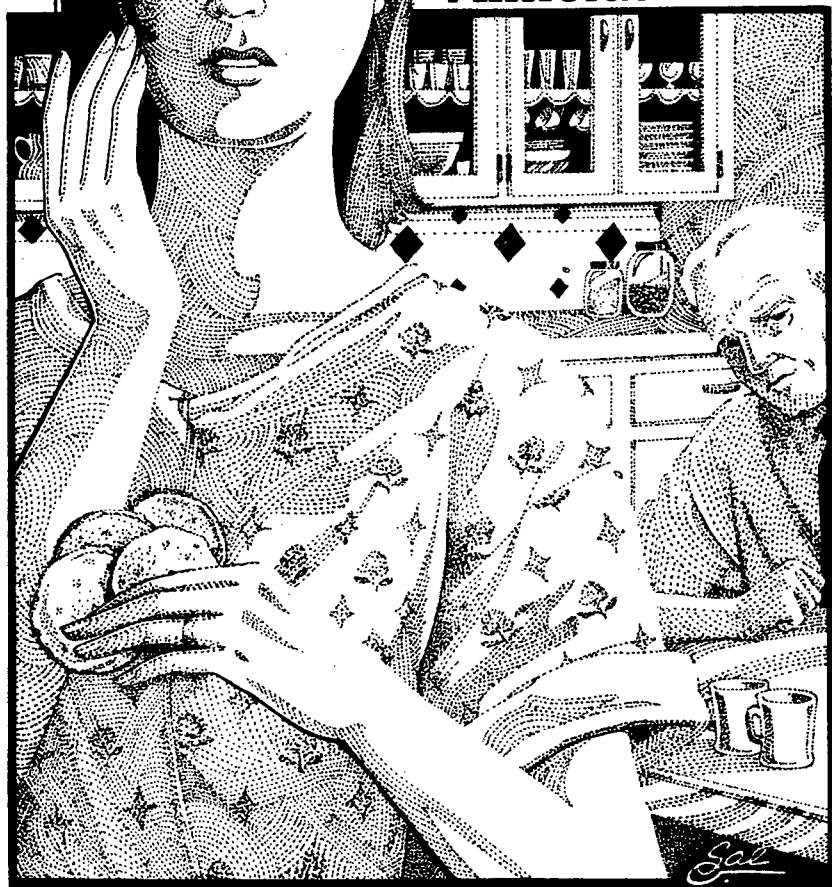


Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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Everything was in place—she'd checked it all three times—when the doorbell rang. John? No, too soon. And surely he had his keys. His kingdom, after all.

She hesitated for a moment, but the bell rang again. She glanced in the mirror, pulled the hair from behind her ear so it fell softly over her left cheek, then hurried down the hall as the bell rang once more.

Who? The paper boy? The Girl Scouts? She grasped the knob and twisted hard. Please, God, not the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The man on the steps was of medium height, with broad shoulders and a slight belly. Maybe mid-fifties, maybe early sixties. Definitely a cop.

"Mrs. Conroy?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sheriff Stone."

Stone, yes. She'd read his name in the local paper. He was the one they would send, of course. But why now?

"Is it about the dog license? I meant to take care of it, but I went a little over my budget this week and I hate troubling my husband. I'll do it next week, I promise."

"Has Officer Dwyer been making a pest of himself again?" Stone smiled and shook his head. "I'm afraid he takes his job a little too seriously. You'll have to excuse him, ma'am, but you know how it is. Young man raised on all those cop shows is bound to find smalltown policework a bit of a disappointment. Next week'll be fine."

"Thank you."

Stone stopped smiling. "This isn't about the dog. You have a few minutes?"

"Of course, sheriff. Come on in."

Stone walked into the hall, removing his hat and fluffing the gray hair where the band had flattened it. The hallway hadn't changed since he'd last been in the house—when was it? Five years at least. Funny. You'd think a young wife would want to do a little redecorating. Then again, John Conroy wasn't a man to waste money on a new side table when the old one still had three good legs.

He followed the young woman down the hall and into the roomy kitchen. It smelled the way a kitchen should, smelled of coffee and baking and something slow-cooking on the stove.

"Have a seat. Would you like some coffee? It's just been made."

"Thank you very much, ma'am. Never turn down a fresh cup of coffee or an ear of sweet corn, my old man used to say."

Stone placed his hat on the frayed wicker of the seat beside him and glanced around at the baskets of dried flowers and Mason jars filled with macaroni and beans lining the kitchen counter. Funny thing about kitchens. A woman could take a kitchen and make it her own without spending a cent more than grocery money. Some women, anyway.

He watched as she poured the coffee and carefully removed some cookies from a metal rack. She was still a pretty girl, no doubt about it, but she was beginning to look like a Conroy woman. Had that same anxious look around the eyes they all got sooner or later.

She placed the coffee and cookies on the table, then sat and waited. Stone waited, too.

"You said this isn't about the dog?"

"No, ma'am." He reached for one of the small round cookies. "It's about the gun."

He watched for a reaction, but her expression didn't change.

"Did I fill something out wrong on the permit?"

"The permit's fine. Look, ma'am, I'm the last person to go poking into people's business—unless they ask me to by breaking the law, of course. But with guns it's different. I see someone's pulled a pistol permit, I like to stop by for a little chat. Especially when there's a child in the house."

He kept quiet as he reached for the coffee. A few drops sloshed over the rim of the cup and onto the table. She went back to the counter for a sponge to wipe it off, then returned to her seat. Was that a bruise on her cheek? He wasn't sure. The light shining through the tree outside the window cast a shadow on that side of her face. But she'd turned her chair slightly away as she sat, so he was probably right.

"You don't need to worry, sheriff. I keep the gun in a safe place."

"Is there such a thing? Your son's what, about two?"

"That's right." She looked surprised, the way they often did when they realized he knew his job.

"At that age they're regular little speed demons, aren't they? I've got four myself, so believe me, I know how fast they move, especially toward trouble. And guns are nothing but trouble, Mrs. Conroy."

"I understand that, and I assure you I take it quite seriously. I take all the safety precautions. And I learned how to handle it

before I bought it—I know how to shoot.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. A crimeridden neighborhood like this, you never know when you’ll need a skill like that.”

She smiled. God, she was young. Marrying John Conroy had probably been the first mistake she’d ever made in her life.

“I understand, sheriff. You’re wondering why I think I need a gun. This may sound silly, but I get nervous when I’m alone here. We’re a bit isolated from our neighbors, and my husband works very hard. He’s often away till late at night.”

Stone knew all about Conroy’s hard work and long hours. He’d seen him working real hard at impressing the new barmaid at the Tap. Working real late at it, too.

“Well, you see, that’s part of the problem, ma’am. Middle of the night things tend to get a bit out of proportion. Sounds, fears, you name it. I’m talking from long, sad experience when I say that, Mrs. Conroy. You know the McCauley place, that big rundown house off Chestnut Street?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Alan Franklin down at the bank’s been tearing his hair out for years trying to sell the place, but people think it’s a bad luck house. Now, if you ask me, people make their own luck, good or bad. But I will say that house has seen some trouble.

“The woman used to live there, Mrs. McCauley, she bought a pistol. Said she was nervous, same as you. Problem is, she was a bit too nervous. Shot Jake McCauley to death one night by accident. Imagine—poor fellow gets up for a glass of water, trips over the cat, knocks something over, next thing you know he’s meeting his Maker, just like that.

“That was a real tragedy, that shooting. Folks in town were real fond of Jake. Fond of Ellen, too, but she couldn’t face them after that. Couldn’t even face her own kids.”

Stone reached for another cookie, hoping that Mary Ellen hadn’t cooked anything special for dinner.

“These are good. Unusual flavor. What’s in them?”

“Anise.”

“You’d better move fast before I eat them all.”

“That’s all right, I don’t eat sweets. I made them for my son. He’s the only one in the family with a sweet tooth.”

“Where is he, napping?”

“No. He’s visiting my mother till the end of the week.” Stone wondered how she’d managed that. John Conroy was a man who

liked to keep his possessions close at hand.

"Well, as I said, that shooting was a sad business. Mrs. McCauley, her mistake was she didn't know herself well enough. Jumpy woman like that has no business being within a hundred yards of a loaded firearm. Jumpy man wouldn't either, you understand."

She shifted slightly in her seat, but the left side of her face was still shadowed.

"Of course, that McCauley business was strictly accidental. They're not always as straightforward as all that. You know Fran, that redheaded woman works at Snyder's?"

"I don't believe I do."

"No? You should stop by and meet her. She's got a son about the same age as yours, and she loves to swap baby stories. Now, Fran, she's one woman whose name'll never appear on a pistol permit. She had a cousin—I can't recall her name, but she was married to one of the Cadeaus. Not very nice, that husband of hers. Kind of guy could get a little quick with his fists, if you know what I mean. From drink or just plain meanness, who knows? Anyway, he kept a pistol in the house for no good reason I could ever figure out. One night she got fed up, and he got two shots at close range.

"Evangeline, that was her name, I remember now. Well, Evangeline, she made a mistake, too. She didn't know the local law well enough to trust that we'd do the right thing by her if she had filed a complaint. Thought we would have just sent the guy out for a walk around the block and left it at that.

"That's what happens when there's a weapon close by, Mrs. Conroy. Things get a bit out of hand, and the next thing you know, one life's gone and another's ruined.

"Most of the shootings I've had are like that one, spur of the moment. I had one case, though, maybe fifteen years back, where it was all thought out. Folks lived on Maple Hill, near where the Women's Society has that old Victorian. You belong to the Women's Society?"

"No."

"It's a nice organization, my wife's belonged for years. Do a lot of the usual nonsense, of course, bake sales and flower arranging and all. But I suspect mostly they just trade stories. Help each other out with life's little problems. Big ones, too, I suppose.

"Anyway, in this case on Maple Hill there was money involved. Now, I'm not saying that was the whole story, but there was money.

So what this Mrs. Walker does is she kills her husband and stages a burglary."

Stone began to laugh the way he always did when he thought of little Mrs. Walker and her big plans, then stopped.

"I'm sorry. Life's precious and a man lost his, so I shouldn't laugh. But that Mrs. Walker was something else. You know how she got caught? She looked out her kitchen door and noticed the ground was muddy, so after she killed her old man she put on a pair of men's galoshes and stomped around in them. Made muddy footprints leading between the broken window and the body. Took nice long strides, too, so it'd look like a man's steps. Even cut the galoshes up into little pieces and sewed them into a pillow afterward, all neat and tidy.

"Clever, right? Only thing is, she didn't notice that the mud outside wasn't from rain at all, just from the sprinkler her husband had left on out back. Now, none of us cops is a genius, but we did find it kind of hard to understand why a thief would stand around ankle deep in a mud patch on one side of the house, then break through a window on the other side. Not to mention why he'd be wearing galoshes in the first place, beautiful sunny day like that."

Stone laughed again.

"Mrs. Walker, I'd say her mistake was she got a little too complicated. Tried to plan a perfect crime. Watched too much TV, I expect."

He met her eyes for a moment. Again he could read nothing in them.

"I could go on, but you get the idea. Guns and sad songs, they go hand in hand."

He pushed back his chair and stood. "Well, Mrs. Conroy, now that I've said my piece and eaten your cookies, I'd best be going. See if I can stop young Officer Dwyer before he puts the cuffs on some kid's pet."

He carried his cup and plate over to the counter, glancing into the pot on the stove. Beef stew. Conroy's favorite?

"Now, if I were you, ma'am, what I'd do is I'd put the rest of those cookies in a tin right away or they'll be stale well before your son gets back from his granny's."

He moved back to the table and picked up his hat. "What flavor'd you say they were?"

"Anise."

"Tastes kind of like licorice. Strange flavor for a little kid to like. Ever notice how they always leave the black jelly beans behind in the Easter basket? Mine did, anyway. Well, who's to say?"

Stone continued to talk as they moved down the hall.

"Murder and mistakes, that's how it goes. Sometimes it's a big blunder, like Mrs. Walker and those galoshes. And sometimes it's something so small you'd be hard pressed to put your finger on it exactly. All you know is some bell goes off and just won't stop ringing."

She opened the door. He walked out, then turned on the top step to face her. He smiled, but his eyes looked old and—sad?

She watched as he went down the steps. He moved stiffly, like someone who had sat too long. Closer to sixty than fifty, she decided. Old enough, anyway, to have a whole collection of stories, suitable for all occasions. Smart enough to have made some of them up, too.

"Sheriff Stone?"

He turned and looked up from the bottom of the steps.

"You know, some people might take what you've just told me as a warning."

"You're right. Some folks might."

"On the other hand, some might take it as a challenge."

"You're right about that, too."

He set his cap carefully on his head and pulled it forward the way cops did, until the brim shadowed his face and she couldn't see his eyes.

"You have a nice day, ma'am."

FICTION

A Dead Sailor's Secret

by Herb Henson

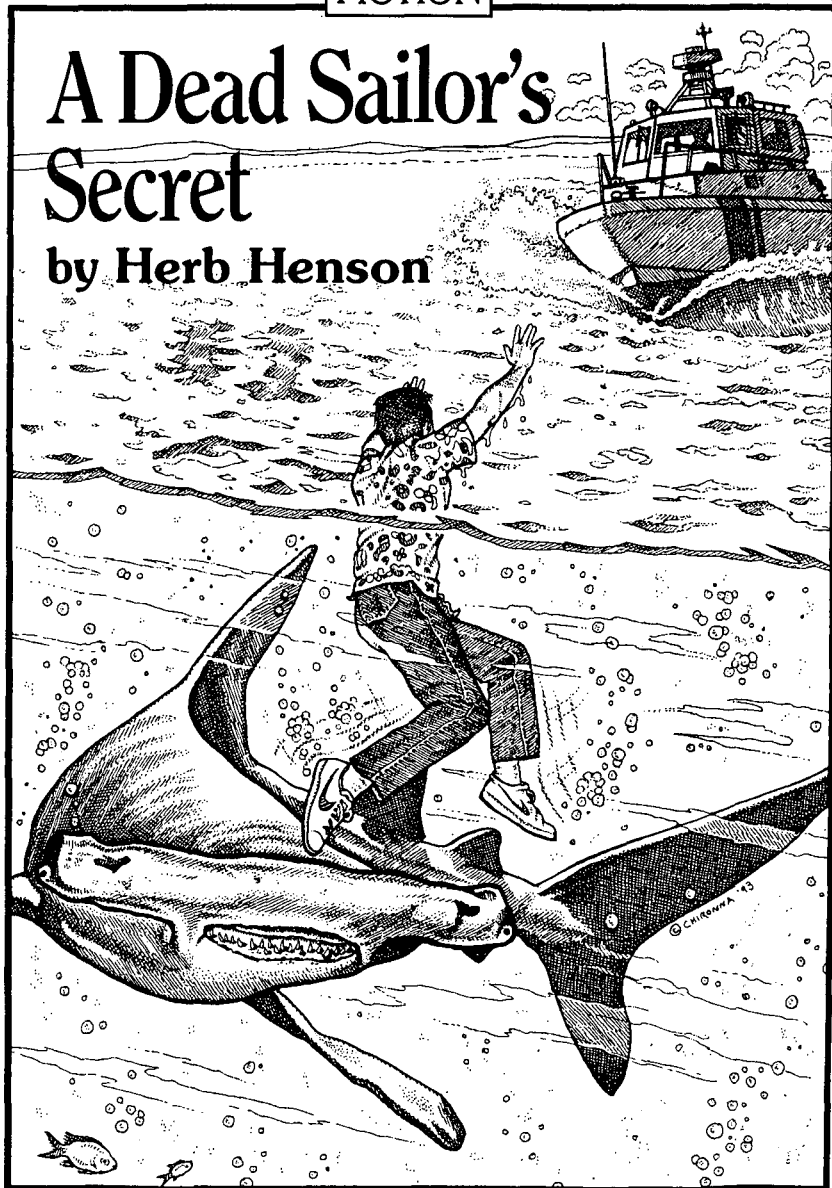


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Down, down sank Willis Barney, enveloped in the quiet cool below the surface of the Sulu Sea, descending into the shadowy grave of forgotten ships and drowned sailors.

The blow to Barney's head had affected him in a strange way. Although barely conscious, he was fully aware of his perilous situation. His mind and body, however, seemed disconnected; the one unable—or perhaps unwilling—to command the other to action. The sea had been Barney's home for much of his life, and he was comfortable in its embrace. Sinking ever deeper—his descent hastened by the heavy cinder block tied to his legs—he was in a familiar and peaceful world devoid of earthly troubles. But something or someone in the back of his mind was trying to get his attention.

Sandra Drewett.

She seemed to be saying something to him. He couldn't hear her words, but he could see the urgency in her eyes. Damn the woman, he thought. What does she want? I wish she would leave me alone. She had gotten him into trouble before, and she was responsible for the predicament he found himself in now as well. Something about a dead sailor who wasn't really dead. He struggled to re-

member. He recalled that Drewett had come to the village to talk to him just two days ago. That had been the beginning.

Sandra Drewett had arrived in Saint Peter's Gate at noon on a sticky-hot day, parking her navy staff car on the dusty shoulder of the road in front of Barney's Place. The tavern, which catered almost exclusively to sailors and marines from the nearby Subic Bay Naval Base, was owned by Willis Barney and his Filipina partner, Melinda Velasquez.

Drewett, an agent of the Naval Investigative Service, had strode authoritatively through the empty bar to find Barney dozing in a wicker chair on the patio in the back, his bare feet propped on a crude barbecue grill made from a fifty-gallon fuel drum. Beyond the makeshift patio and a strip of dirty beach, the tropical sun cast its blazing reflection on the languid surface of the bay. In the distance, on the far side of tiny Grande Island near the mouth of the bay, a toylike warship knifed through the shimmering blue swells of the South China Sea.

"Working hard?" she said sarcastically, rousing him from his nap.

Rubbing the stubble of whiskers on his chin, Barney glared at Drewett. He was not happy to see her. He had little liking for female sailors—especially officers. Drewett in particular seemed to radiate an aura of assumed importance that never failed to rankle him. Trim, not quite pretty, she somehow managed to look every inch a naval officer no matter where she was or what she was doing. On this day she wore civilian clothes—prefaded jeans, a pale blue blouse, jogging shoes with a tangle of laces—and, he thought, a condescending look in her cold blue eyes. Expatriate ex-sailors, he knew, were not among Sandra Drewett's favorite people. Especially those like himself who operated bars near the navy base. "What do you want?" he said brusquely.

"Can I sit?" she asked, her eyes inspecting his wrinkled khaki shorts, faded San Miguel Brewery T-shirt, and long bony legs, an expression of disdain on her face. "I have a business proposition to discuss with you." Not waiting for his answer, she pulled up a wicker chair, sat down, crossed her legs. "But first a question."

"What's the question?" said Barney warily. When Drewett came around, it usually meant trouble.

"Do you plan to stay in business here until the base closes?" she asked.

Barney frowned. It was a question that had been on his mind a lot in recent weeks. The U.S. and Philippine governments had failed to reach an agreement about future use of in-country American bases. Accordingly, the U.S. planned to close both Clark Air Force Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base. Clark—nearly destroyed by the recent eruption of the Mount Pinatubo volcano—had already been abandoned. Operations at Subic, the navy said, would be phased out within a year. When the base closed, Barney's Place would also have to close. What then? He didn't know. "I expect I'll keep the place open as long as I can," he said.

"Then you should be aware that the navy intends to start cleaning up after itself," she said. "A program is about to get started aimed at closing down some of the bars operated by retired naval personnel in Olongapo City and the nearby villages."

"I'm not surprised," said Barney, although he was. "So what's the business proposition?"

"Unofficially, the base commander can arrange to have the visas of retired sailors who live and do business here re-

voked if he believes their behavior is detrimental to navy interests. His decisions as to who goes and who stays will be based on Naval Investigative Service recommendations." Drewett paused, watching Barney, a devious expression on her face.

Barney sighed, shook his head slowly. She was about to coerce him into helping her with one of her investigations. She had done it before. "I get the picture," he said, resignedly. "And I don't want to leave here any sooner than I have to. What is it I have to do to earn a favorable NIS recommendation?"

Drewett smiled her "gotcha" smile. "Do you remember a young seaman named Robert Ellis?" she asked.

"Dead for about five years now," Barney said.

"Tell me what you know about his death."

Barney shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. Ellis fell overboard off the frigate *Michael Finster* in the straits between Luzon and Mindoro during a mid watch. We searched for half a night and most of the next day and didn't find him. The skipper figured the sharks got him."

"You were his division chief?" Drewett asked.

"I was," he replied. "What's this about?"

"Officially, Ellis is listed as lost at sea," Drewett said. "But we now have reason to believe that he went over the side deliberately and is alive and living in Puerto Princesa City on the island of Palawan. That makes Ellis a deserter instead of an accident victim."

"What makes you think he's alive?" Barney asked. Drewett's information didn't fit the Robert Ellis he remembered. The young sailor had been a novice radioman assigned to Barney's communications division aboard the *Michael Finster*. "Ellis didn't seem to me the type to jump ship," he added. "Best I can remember, he was a good kid—a hard worker."

"The FBI got a tip from a mailman in Ellis's Iowa hometown," Drewett explained. "This mailman had been delivering mail to the Ellis family for twenty years or so and knew about Robert. When he saw a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Ellis—return address: *Robert Ellis, General Delivery, Puerto Princesa City, Philippines*—he told his supervisor about it. The supervisor contacted the FBI."

"I'm sure the FBI must have talked to the kid's parents," Barney said. "What did they have to say?"

"According to the FBI report, the parents were mystified. They claim—and the FBI agent who made the report thinks they're telling the truth—that they had not previously had any contact with their son, and believed up until the letter was delivered that he was dead. Now, they're as interested in locating him as the FBI and the navy."

"What was in the letter?"

"Not much," said Drewett, toying absently with a lock of her short-cut brown hair. "Robert—if indeed Robert wrote the letter—just said that he was okay but needed to have an operation. He asked the parents to send one thousand dollars to cover his medical expenses."

"Was the letter handwritten?" Barney asked.

Drewett shook her head. "Typed on an old style manual typewriter. He wanted the money sent in care of Gloria Norte, General Delivery, Puerto Princesa City."

"I've heard that name before," Barney said.

"I expect you have," said Drewett, sitting now on the edge of her chair. "According to the ship's report on the alleged accident and the follow-up investigation conducted by the NIS at Subic, Gloria Norte was Ellis's girlfriend. She was a hostess employed by a country-

western bar in Olongapo City. Her friends at the bar told the NIS investigator that she had left Olongapo and gone back home to Palawan several days before Ellis and the *Michael Finster* got under way for the return trip to the States."

Barney was watching the distant destroyer, now in the lee of Grande Island and turning south into the channel leading to the naval base anchorage. There were times when he wished he could go to sea again. Shipboard life was simple, orderly, and predictable. If a sailor kept his nose clean, he didn't have to deal with NIS agents like Drewett. He wondered what she wanted from him now. Information and nothing more he hoped. "I don't know if this is important or not," he said, "but the scuttlebutt among the sailors in my division was that Ellis had romance problems. *Michael Finster* had been in port here for nearly two months for repairs to the ship's engineering plant, plenty long enough for him to have gotten into a troublesome affair with a local girl. And young sailors like Ellis—having a fullblown love affair for the first time—often don't know how to handle it."

"Especially when they've fallen for one of these Filipinas who are doing everything they

can to snag a husband," said Drewett.

Barney shook his head, brow furrowed. "It isn't always a one-way thing," he said. "The girls sometimes fall in love, too. You're guessing that Ellis and Gloria conspired to get together after he jumped ship. That doesn't make sense to me for a couple of reasons.

"First, Gloria would have wanted Ellis to marry her and take her home with him to the States. So why didn't he just tie the knot with her, then pay one of the immigration arrangers in Olongapo to do her papers so she could join him later at home? As a fugitive here in the P.I., he wouldn't have had much of a future.

"Second, if Ellis was going to jump ship, why didn't he just disappear before the ship got under way instead of risking his life by going over the side? The straits where he went overboard are fairly narrow, but it would still have been one hell of a long swim. Besides that, there are a lot of nasties in these waters that represent a significant risk to a man in the water."

"I've given that some thought," said Drewett. "Ellis's parents probably wouldn't have approved of his bringing home a Filipina wife. Interracial couples are a bit out of the ordi-

nary in Heartland, U.S.A. Also, the navy would have had to give him permission to marry. The procedure to get this permission is deliberately complicated and slow so that the guy has lots of time to think over his decision.

"Another option would have been for him to file fiancé petition papers for her to come to the States and join him later. But Ellis was due to receive orders from the Bureau of Personnel transferring him to Naval Communications Station, Diego Garcia—a year of isolated duty on an atoll in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The transfer orders weren't on the street yet, but Ellis knew about them from talking on the telephone with his detailer at the bureau. Bad news for a young man who believes he's found Miss Right and wants to be with her."

Barney nodded. "And to a kid, a year is a long time."

"So if, as you suggest, the affection between Robert and Gloria was mutual," Drewett continued, "they may well have cooked up a desperation scheme to stay together right here in the Philippines. If the navy thought Ellis was dead, then no one would be looking for him. Gloria could have arranged to have a fisherman pick him up after he jumped

overboard. Do you remember if there were any native boats around that night?"

"There may have been," Barney said. "The fishermen work at night and usually don't show any lights on their boats. So what are you planning to do, and what do I have to do with it?"

"I'm going to Palawan to conduct an investigation," said Drewett. "And I want you to go with me."

"Now, hold on. I've got a business to run," Barney protested. "I can't just up and go off to Palawan with you." He pulled himself up out of his chair and began pacing the patio, angry. "Anyway, why me?" he demanded. "What special reason do you have for wanting me along?"

"That should be obvious," Drewett said. "You know the man and will recognize him if you see him. All I've got to go on is an old boot camp graduation picture the NIS at Naval Station, Great Lakes, managed to dig up. Also, you speak Tagalog, which I don't, and you don't look like a cop, which I do no matter how much I try not to. Your partner Melinda can run this place without you for a few days."

"Damn," said Barney. "And if I don't cooperate with you I'll get kicked out of the country?"

"You make it sound like blackmail," replied Drewett, standing, a mock expression of hurt on her face. "It's nothing of the sort. I'm just offering you an opportunity to earn the gratitude of the base commander at a time when that may be important to you."

"Humpf," Barney snorted. "When?"

"We go to Manila late this afternoon," said Drewett. "Then on to Palawan in the morning on the inter-island Philippine Airlines flight."

Barney had been underwater for about half a minute. Occupied as he was with a muddled process of recollection, the primal need to get a fresh breath of air had not yet become urgent. Although his vision was as blurred as his thinking, he realized that he was near the ocean floor, perceived as a dim reflection of the surface sunlight on a jumbled seascape of white and brown coral. Sea fans swayed back and forth in the current; tiny reef fish darted here and there, disturbed by this sudden presence.

His legs, lashed together with the same rope that held the cinder block, hit first, crushing coral and stirring a cloud of sand and coral bits that

swirled about as his body crumpled to the bottom. There he lay, waiting for the murk to settle, his mind still divided into factions engaged in a tug-of-war for his attention. One faction was urging him to take action to save himself; the other was trying to remember the sequence of events that had led to his being in this deadly fix. He remembered going to Manila with Drewett and boarding the inter-island flight to Palawan the following morning.

From twenty-five thousand feet, Palawan had appeared to consist solely of a towering green mountain range, spread north and south as far as could be seen, thrusting upwards from the glittering blue ocean to form a boundary between the Sulu and South China seas.

Drewett, Barney remembered, had been excited, perched on the edge of her seat, watching through the scratched plastic window next to her seat as the Philippine Airlines jet began its descent. She wore leather sandals, white shorts, and a flower-print blouse. Bug-eye sunglasses were pushed up on her forehead; a small automatic camera hung from a strap around her neck. She looked like a tourist. Almost. Too much of the time, unconsciously, her

eyes roved about the plane, studying the other passengers. A cop at work.

"Beautiful," she remarked to Barney, who was sprawled in the aisle seat beside her. In appearance at least—at Drewett's insistence—he was a changed man. The day before he had looked like the slightly seedy expatriate he was. Now, wearing a shirt similar to Drewett's, jeans, and sneakers, his face neatly shaved and his sandy brown hair trimmed by Melinda, he too could pass as a tourist. Ignoring Drewett, Barney pinched his nostrils shut and blew, trying to pop his ears. The plane banked steeply, then leveled out, descending rapidly, beginning its approach to Palawan's capital city.

Puerto Princesa, seen from the air as a sprawling hodgepodge of rundown buildings with rusty tin roofs, spread across a narrow isthmus between the mountains near the center of the island. On the eastern side of the isthmus was a wide half-moon bay, Honda Bay, on which reposed an assortment of miniature sailing yachts, native outrigger boats, and rust-streaked coastal steamers. The western side of the isthmus was a narrow strip of surf and sand lined with nipa huts visible through the tops of coconut palms and mangrove

trees. Tiny offshore islands—emerald circles surrounded by white sand and turquoise shallows—slipped beneath the plane's wings.

Moments later, the jet touched down with a jarring bump followed immediately by the roar of reverse-thrust engines as they raced down a narrow asphalt strip between the trees, braking hard and finally wheeling about and coming to a stop near a small concrete terminal building.

"Remember who we are," Drewett whispered in Barney's ear as they unfastened their seatbelts. They were traveling incognito, the purpose of their trip known only to themselves so that word of their true mission would not get around and send their quarry into hiding.

"Right," grumbled Barney. "We're travel writers." It was a deception he wasn't happy with. Nor was he pleased with the prospect of tracking down young Ellis and his Filipina, a pair wanting only to be left alone to live out their lives together. He didn't condone desertion from the navy, but he thought he understood Robert Ellis. He had been a young sailor himself once. The hunt was on, but he didn't have to like his part in it.

Barney held his bottle up to

the light, squinting through the brown glass, checking the level of the remaining brew. This done, he savored another cool swig, sighing appreciatively. To him, San Miguel Beer was one of the true comforts native to a country that required its occupants to endure daily the discomforts of an equatorial climate.

Across the table, a film of sweat on her brow, Drewett sipped from a cold bottle of Royal Soda through a red and white striped waxed-paper straw. They were sitting on the shady, flower-scented verandah of Puerto Princesa's Bangkok Hotel cooling off after a harrowing motor tricycle ride into town from the airport. Pretty Filipinas in white blouses and checkered skirts bustled about, serving drinks and taking early lunch orders from a scattering of local people who were talking quietly among themselves at nearby tables.

"So what's your plan?" Barney asked.

"Finding Gloria Norte is one approach," Drewett replied. "But since we're not here officially, the usual sources of information for tracking someone down aren't available to us. I think we'll be more successful concentrating on locating Robert Ellis."

"What would a couple of writers who just arrived do?" asked Barney.

"They'd probably go around town interviewing people while taking a lot of pictures and notes," said Drewett.

"So let's just tell anyone who wants to know that we're writing an article for an American travel magazine," Barney suggested. "It would be logical then for us to want to talk to any Americans who live here. Find out what they have to say about the place."

Drewett nodded. "That's about what I had in mind."

Barney held a finger up to his lips. A large, garishly dressed Filipina was approaching their table, a clipboard clutched to her massive breasts.

"I am Miss Imelda Romero, the hotel concierge," the big woman twittered at them in a birdlike voice, easing herself to a halt alongside their table.

Miss Romero, her considerable bulk swaying precariously on the spiked heels of a pair of tiny yellow pumps, had somehow packed herself into a figure-hugging business suit made of an iridescent blue-green material. A large metal sunflower was pinned to the front of her coat; a yellow scarf was bunched around her neck and tucked into the collar of a pink silk blouse. On her plump

face resided multiple layers of cosmetics of almost every sort, highlighted by red blotches of rouge on her cheeks. "It is my great pleasure to assist you with your comfort, recreation, and business needs while you are guests at the Bangkok," she recited mechanically, black eyes darting between Barney and Drewett.

Barney stood and introduced himself and Drewett. "We're American travel writers," he told the concierge, inviting her to sit with them.

Miss Romero's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Writers," she said doubtfully, her crimson lips assuming a wooden smile. "How very nice."

Barney braced the chair as the big woman wriggled and shoved her bulging buttocks between the chair arms.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Romero," said Drewett as Barney took his seat, "you can probably help us with our business here."

"Unfortunately, I have but little experience in public relations matters," said Miss Romero, nervously tapping her clipboard with a red plastic fingernail. "Of course I will do for you whatever I can."

"We want to interview Americans who live in Puerto Princesa or nearby," Barney said. "Their perspective on Pa-

lawan will be of particular interest to our readers in the States."

"Perhaps you could help us in locating them," Drewett suggested.

Sweat appeared on Miss Romero's forehead. She produced a crumpled hankie from the folds of her dress and daintily dabbed away the moisture. "There are some foreigners who live in Puerto Princesa," she said finally. "However, they are Europeans for the most part, and perhaps two or three from Australia or New Zealand. But Americans—" She arched her penciled eyebrows and slowly shook her head.

"Is there someone else we might contact who would be more familiar with Palawan's expatriate community?" Drewett asked.

"I think not," said Miss Romero a bit huffily. "The Bangkok is the only five-star hotel on the island, and the travel agents in Manila *always* recommend us to foreigners. The hotel is also the social center for outsiders who live here. Therefore, it is rare indeed that I am not aware when a foreign visitor arrives in Puerto Princesa. If you wish, I can prepare a list of people you may want to interview. I can have this list ready for you by tomorrow."

"That would be helpful," said Drewett.

"In the meantime," the concierge continued, the cadence of her voice mechanical again, "please advise me if you are unhappy in any way with your accommodations. As to recreation opportunities—" She unclipped a large brown envelope from her clipboard and handed it across the table to Barney. "This envelope contains brochures about nearby resorts offering fishing, diving, and other pastimes. If you see something that interests you, it is one of my many duties to help with the arrangements."

Twisting her fat torso, Miss Romero extracted herself from the clutches of the chair and struggled to her feet. "And now I must see to the other guests," she said, lurching, shifting her feet to achieve vertical stability. "Please enjoy your stay at the Bangkok."

"Weird woman," commented Drewett after the concierge had teeter-tottered away. "And not much help."

"We don't need her anyway," said Barney. He had emptied the envelope on the table and quickly inspected the assortment of brochures. "See the Filipino in this picture?" He pushed an open brochure across the table to Drewett and pointed to a photograph show-

ing a chubby man in diving gear standing in front of a beached outrigger boat. "I know this guy," he explained. "His name is Bing De Leon, and he used to be a navy chief—a mess specialist. We served together on the *Java Sea*."

"Says here he's the owner of the Tropics Dive Shop in Puerto Princesa," Drewett said.

Barney nodded. "Our first visit after lunch," he said, motioning to a waitress. "With De Leon's help, maybe we can get this unpleasant business over with in a hurry."

"What's so unpleasant about it?" Drewett said. "A trip to an interesting out-of-the-way island to find a relatively minor criminal—all paid for by Uncle Sam. I think it's a plum assignment. You should be happy you got the chance to come along."

"It's unpleasant to me because I can understand what motivated young Ellis," said Barney. "I have a hard time thinking of him as a criminal, and I don't like being a part of screwing up his life."

"Ellis screwed up his life himself when he deserted," said Drewett. "And what you're saying sounds strange coming from a man who served more than twenty years in the navy."

"It's because I served all that time in the navy that I understand Ellis and others like

him," said Barney, suddenly agitated. Drewett had a way of getting under his skin. "A lot of that twenty years was spent on ships at sea. And when sailors and their wives or girlfriends are separated, frequently for months or years at a time, their relationships more often than not come apart.

"Ellis had a relationship he wanted to keep together, and that's why he did what he did. This is something you wouldn't know about or understand because it's *men* who *man* the navy's ships and endure the hardships that go with sea duty."

"There are women assigned to ships now, too," said Drewett stiffly.

"Women are assigned to tenders that stay tied up to a pier somewhere. Being on a ship like that isn't much different than shore duty."

"I think you just resent women being in the navy," said Drewett, angry now, face flushed. "And that has nothing whatever to do with this case. So just—just stuff it, Barney."

Barney stifled his response. The waitress had arrived to take their lunch orders.

Barney needed air soon. Resisting the powerful urge to open his windpipe was de-

manding more and more of his attention, forcing him to shift his thoughts to saving himself. He was aware that the urge to breathe would soon become too strong to resist and he would drown. But he couldn't let that happen. There was something important he had to do—something still concealed in the recesses of his memory.

He began pulling desperately at the ropes that bound his feet. He had to get free of the heavy cinder block that held him anchored to the bottom. How had he gotten into this mess? He remembered visiting Bing De Leon. The visit had been important. He was here on the bottom of the sea because of something De Leon had told him.

But what?

Barney and Drewett had found the Tropics Dive Shop in the city's commercial district, sandwiched between Wong's Machine Parts Supply House and Josie's Magnolia Ice Cream Store, halfway down a pot-holed lane off Rizal Avenue, Puerto Princesa's main street. A bunch of dusty seashells piled on top of a fishnet adorned the fly-specked front window. Barney paid the tricycle taxi driver as Drewett climbed out of the cramped sidecar.

Since lunch at the hotel, Drewett had been cool toward him, to say the least. By her manner, she had reasserted her authority, letting him know that she was in charge and tolerating his presence only because she might need him in some insignificant way to accomplish her mission. Not waiting for Barney to finish with the tricycle driver, she pushed open the door to the shop and stepped inside. Shaking his head, Barney followed. Women!

Inside the shop, across a floor of unvarnished hardwood slats, a deep counter stretched across the back of the room. Against the wall behind the counter was a wooden rack on which was stacked an assortment of diving equipment. Next to the rack, beneath faded posters depicting various island and underwater scenes, was a battered desk on which sat an old portable typewriter, stacked metal file trays overflowing with papers, and a row of dog-eared merchandise catalogues. An ancient fan whirled from the corner of the desk, stirring the tumid air and whipping a faded cloth curtain next to the desk which apparently concealed a doorway to the rear of the building.

Behind the counter, legs astraddle a wooden stool, a

teenage Filipina in shorts and halter hovered over a magazine spread open on the counter. Her pretty face was framed by long black hair that spilled across her shoulders and down her back. On the floor by the stool, a brown-skinned boy with vaguely Caucasian features, clad in a pair of dirty white undershorts, snipped pictures from a newspaper with a pair of child-size scissors.

The girl looked up from her magazine as Barney and Drewett came through the door, a sullen expression on her face. "What can I do for you?" she said.

"We're looking for Mr. De Leon," said Barney. "He's an old navy shipmate of mine. My name's Willis Barney."

"Wait a minute," the girl mumbled, dismounting the stool with obvious reluctance. "I'll get him for you." She stepped around the boy, shoved aside the curtain, and disappeared through the doorway.

Moments later, a pudgy Filipino man dressed in grease-smudged overalls brushed the curtain aside, wiping his hands on a rag. A broad smile creased his face. "Willis," he said, extending his hand enthusiastically to Barney. "Good to meet you again. But this is big surprise. Why you come to Palawan?"

"Good to see you again, too, Bing," Barney said, pumping De Leon's hand. "I should ask you the same question. The last time I saw you, you were running the galley on the old *Java Sea*."

"I am retired from navy now," said De Leon, his gaze shifting to Drewett, curious, appraising. "Puerto Princesa my hometown. Here, the pension I get from navy is lot of money. Enough for me to buy this business and make even more money. Got to do that. I still got big family to support. I could not do so good if I stay in States."

The girl had followed her father into the shop. She stooped and pulled the protesting boy to his feet. Squatting on her haunches, she gathered up the child's newspaper and scissors, handed them to him, and pointed to the corner away from the door. "Play over there," she said. "So you don't get stepped on." Reluctantly, the boy did as he was told.

"This my oldest daughter, Tessie," De Leon said, laying his hand affectionately on the girl's slender shoulder. "Tessie born and raised in the States. She not used to life in the P.I. yet. I just move her and rest of family here from San Diego a few months ago."

"It sucks here," Tessie said, unsmiling, brushing off her father's hand. She snatched her magazine off the counter, plopped down in the swivel chair by the desk, and resumed reading, dismissing them all.

De Leon stared angrily at his daughter's back, shaking his head. "Kids," he said. "No manners. She have boyfriend in San Diego she can't forget about."

"Your son?" Barney asked, indicating the boy.

"No," said De Leon. "My kids are bigger. Tessie take care of this boy during the day. Boy's mother works for Chinaman next door. And the father—" De Leon shrugged his shoulders. "He not around."

Barney introduced Drewett. "She's an NIS agent from Subic," he explained, ignoring her glare. "No one's supposed to know it, but we're here looking for a navy deserter."

De Leon's eyebrows raised a notch. "Umm," he said. "Well, come upstairs and we talk. Glad you come. I was working on broken air compressor. Now I have excuse to quit."

A few minutes later Barney and Drewett were seated on the couch in the living room of the De Leons' comfortably furnished apartment above the shop. Drewett sat as far away from Barney as she could get. De Leon introduced them to his

wife Lolita, an energetic little woman with short black hair just beginning to gray, and to Thomas, Mary, James, Matthew, Esther, and Bing Junior, ages eight to fifteen; then shooed away the children; left the room to wash up while Lolita served coffee; and finally returned to plop and sink in the cushions of a large tubshaped wicker chair opposite the couch and his two guests. "So," he said. "First we talk of your business. Sea stories later. What is this about navy deserter?"

Drewett explained, requesting that De Leon keep the information confidential. "The concierge at our hotel said she didn't know of any Americans living in Puerto Princesa or nearby," she concluded. "Do you know anything that might help us out?"

De Leon had sipped his coffee and listened intently to Drewett. "This concierge at the hotel is Imelda Romero?" he asked.

"Yes," said Drewett. "Kind of a strange one."

"She just seem strange," said De Leon. "Actually she just uptight all the time because she worry about keeping her job too much. Needs money because she support two daughters at expensive university in Manila. But if anybody know about whites who live or pass

through here, she the one. Imelda send you to me?"

"Nope," said Barney. "I spotted your picture in a brochure advertising your shop. But Imelda thinks Drewett and I are travel writers. She doesn't know we're navy, so she wouldn't necessarily think to hook us up with you."

"This is true," agreed De Leon. "But there is one American around here who could be this Ellis you look for. Name this man goes by is Alex Jones. I wonder why Imelda not tell you about him?"

Drewett sat up straight on the couch.

"Please describe this Alex Jones," she said.

"Looks like he twenty-five or so," said De Leon. "Medium size, brown hair, and talks like American. Been around Puerto Princesa for several years."

"Matches the description of the guy we're looking for," said Drewett, looking at Barney for confirmation. Barney nodded. "Where can we find him?"

"Jones works as mate aboard big motor schooner named *Tara*. *Tara* in and out of Puerto Princesa harbor a lot. Usually, she here about one month, then gone about one month. Hauls cargo of machinery and parts from Singapore to the islands for old Wong, the Chinaman next door. Owner of boat mean-

tempered Australian named Thomas Blade. Jones and Blade both been in my shop couple of times. I fix *Tara's* air compressor for them."

"Is the *Tara* in port now?" asked Barney.

De Leon nodded. "Both men come here see Wong just yesterday. Usually anchor *Tara* way across on other side of Honda Bay. Boat easy to spot. About fifty foot, two masts, steel hull, painted black."

Drewett glanced at her wristwatch.

"Too late today," she said. "But I can ask Imelda Romero to arrange for a boat to take Mr. Barney and me out to the *Tara* in the morning."

"Sooner the better," said Barney.

"Agreed," said Drewett, regarding Barney with icy eyes.

"There is something else," said De Leon. "But I must check out myself before I tell you. Maybe tomorrow." He smiled. "Now, enough business. Lolita have dinner for us soon. Willis. Tell me what you been doing since you leave *Java Sea*."

Drewett excused herself to find the bathroom.

"That woman don't like you, Willis," observed De Leon after Drewett left the room.

"The feeling's mutual," replied Barney.

My knife, thought Barney. He had lost precious seconds trying unsuccessfully to untie the knotted rope that bound his legs to the cinder block. Near panic now, lungs aching, he dug a shaking hand into the pocket of his sodden jeans. His fingers closed around the familiar fold-up pocket knife he had carried since his shipboard sailor days. Jerking the knife from his pocket, he struggled to pull it open, searching for the small recess on the top edge of the blade, working by feel, virtually blind in the still cloudy water.

But the knife fell from his hands, disappearing into the sand on which he sat. Damn! Shifting his position, he sifted his fingers through the sand, searching. The knife was his only chance. If he didn't find it fast, he would die here on the bottom of Honda Bay. Dead for certain—unlike the maybe-dead or maybe-not-dead sailor he and Drewett sought. Drewett. What was happening to Drewett?

Imelda Romero had arranged for an outrigger pump boat and Filipino boatman to take Barney and Drewett across Honda Bay to the *Tara* the morning

after their meeting with Bing De Leon.

Drewett had asked the concierge if she had forgotten about Alex Jones when she and Barney had inquired earlier about Americans residing in Puerto Princesa.

"This man Jones is *just* a sailor," Imelda Romero had replied, her tone revealing her contempt for those who man ships and follow the sea. "Sometimes this man is here, sometimes he is not."

Boarding the diminutive outrigger boat at the city pier that morning, Barney could see the *Tara*, her black hull low in the sparkling green water, twin masts rocking to and fro in the gentle Sulu Sea swells two to three miles away across Honda Bay. He wondered why the schooner was so low in the water. Did she have a full cargo of machinery from Singapore waiting to be off-loaded?

"Looks kind of sinister, doesn't she," remarked Drewett, following Barney's gaze, taking a seat on the forward thwart of the boat. She had warmed up to him a tad since the previous day, some of her anger apparently dissipated.

Barney shrugged and found a spot to sit on the bulwark forward of the midships hatch that sheltered the ancient pump engine from which the

craft derived its name. He took a deep breath, tasting the clear morning air laden with the fresh smell of the seashore, not yet fouled by a day's accumulation of smudge from cooking fires and smoke-belching vehicles.

The Filipino boatman, silent, studied his passengers with dark impenetrable eyes, waiting for a signal from Barney to cast off. He wore ragged trousers as dirty as his boat. His bare torso and arms rippled with the hard muscles of a working seaman. A sweat-stained rag was knotted around his head, controlling an uncombed bush of greasy black hair.

In Tagalog, Barney told the boatman to get under way, pointing to the *Tara*. The boatman loosed the lines that secured his craft to the pier and pushed off. He started the engine by yanking the grimy rope wrapped around its flywheel, then swung the long bamboo tiller handle about, pointing the bow of the boat toward the open bay. Under way, the boatman stood by the midships hatch, legs braced apart in a seaman's stance, his brown face impassive as the boat sliced through the water, the balky engine warming quickly and settling into an even "putt-putt" rhythm.

"Yuk," said Drewett. She had leaned over the rail and spotted thousands of tiny winged insects clinging to the unpainted hull of the boat, hitching a ride to they knew not where.

"Always like that," said Barney. "You wonder how they manage to hang onto the boat in the wind and spray, but somehow they do." Drewett shifted her attention to watching through glasslike water as they glided over the sea bottom, her hair teased by the apparent wind of the boat's motion, face soft and childlike, obviously entranced by the idyllic underwater world she saw below. This, Barney mused, was a rare glimpse of NIS Agent Drewett, of the feminine person who dwelled beneath the hard masculine shell she assumed to perform her job in a world dominated by men. Too bad, he thought. If she wasn't what she was, he might actually learn to like her.

Soon both Barney and Drewett were dozing, slumped on their seats by the rail, lulled to sleep by the pleasant rocking of the boat and the rhythmic sound of the engine.

Barney awoke abruptly when something hard jabbed him in the side. He opened his eyes to stare directly into the business end of a weapon he recognized to be a Russian

AK-47 assault rifle, held unwaveringly only inches from his face by the hard-eyed boatman. Instantly alert, he noted that the pump boat was now dead in the water, bobbing in the swells, engine idling. They were in the middle of the bay about three quarters of the distance from their point of departure to the *Tara*. No other boats were nearby—no witnesses to view what was taking place. Drewett was napping peacefully on the forward thwart.

The boatman stepped back a pace, motioning with the rifle for Barney to stand and turn around, facing the bow. Reluctantly, Barney stood, alert for a chance to snatch the rifle. But the wary boatman allowed him no such opportunity, backing up just out of reach, motioning again for him to face forward. Mind racing, Barney turned around slowly. What was going on? Robbery? Kidnapping? Were he and Drewett to be held for ransom?

He had no further chance to ponder. His head suddenly exploded in pain, and his world went black. Moments later, lying on his face in the bottom of the boat, he was vaguely aware that his legs were being lashed together. Someone was shouting. Drewett? Then he was lifted and pushed roughly over the side between the outrig-

gers. The water closed over him. Something was tied to his legs, dragging him down, to the bottom of the bay.

Barney survived. He had to. No one else could help Drewett. Exhausted, his lungs heaving in great gulps of air, he floated on his back, moving his hands and legs just enough to keep his head above the surface of the water. His eyes wouldn't focus; the sun was a bright haze in a featureless sky. But he could feel its heat on his face. He was alive.

It had been a close brush with death. He had found the knife in the sand, clawed the blade from its case, sawed through the ropes that bound his feet, pushed off the bottom, and kicked his way upward toward the light, breaking the surface of the water just as he reached the limit of his ability to hold his breath.

His troubles, however, were far from over. He felt the sting of salt water on his calves and ankles. In his haste to cut himself free, he had sliced himself as well as the rope. He was bleeding, and that would draw sharks. That there were sharks in Honda Bay he had no doubt. And the list of species in these warm tropical waters would doubtless include maneat-ers.

Drawing on his dwindling reserve of strength, he raised his head from its watery cushion, paddling in a circle, orienting himself as his vision began to clear.

A couple of hundred yards to the south, he saw the pump boat making way, headed for the black schooner, approximately half a mile from where he treaded water. He could hear the steady putt-putt of the boat's engine. Was Drewett still aboard?

Wiping water from his eyes with the back of a dripping hand, he strained to focus his eyes on the pump boat. He could make out the villainous boatman standing by the engine hatch, tiller in one hand, the AK-47 in the other. The man was pointing his weapon toward the bow of the boat. Was Drewett there, huddled in the bilge? Why else would the boatman be pointing the rifle? If she had been clubbed and thrown over the side, wouldn't the man have put aside his weapon?

Barney couldn't see her, but he knew she must be there aboard the boat and en route to the mysterious schooner. What perils awaited her there? Was Alex Jones responsible for this? Since the pump boat was continuing on to the *Tara*, he de-

cided there could be no other explanation.

And what of himself? It was a long swim to anywhere, and he was near the limits of his endurance. The *Tara* was the closest place where he could get out of the water. Also, he had to try to help Drewett.

Face down, ignoring the salt-water sting in his eyes, he looked himself over. He could see the dark stream of blood flowing from the cuts on his legs. He had to get moving.

Weary but resolute, he began swimming toward the distant schooner, using his sidestroke, careful to keep his arms and legs below the surface. The less ruckus he made while swimming the better, he thought. Nonetheless, he knew he would be a lucky man if the sharks didn't find him before he reached safety.

Barney swam. Every few minutes he raised his head from the water to check his progress. He knew he was closing the distance, albeit slowly, but the *Tara* still seemed impossibly far away. His strength was ebbing. It took all his willpower just to keep his arms and legs moving. Time for a rest, he decided. Just for a minute. Rolling over onto his back, he spread his arms and legs to in-

crease his buoyancy. Then he felt it.

The sensation was that of a giant wave rushing beneath his body, raising him up to its crest, then dropping him back into the trough as it swept by.

Shark!

Terror gripped him. But only for a moment. Willis Barney would not give way to panic. He rolled over onto his stomach, opened his eyes, and scanned the dark fathoms of water below him. When the shark made another pass, he would dive and meet him face to face. He couldn't see anything, but he did hear something—the high-speed thrash of propellers.

A boat!

Hope surged through him. Raising his head, treading water, he searched the horizon, what little of it he could see from just a few inches above the waterline. There it was: a big white motor launch, coming from the direction of Puerto Princesa and headed toward the *Tara*. Would they see him?

He waved an arm frantically, trying to shout but managing only a feeble gasp. The boat's heading was such that it would pass to the west of his position—close enough to spot a man in the water but only if the boat's occupants happened to be looking his way. He continued to wave, giving up on try-

ing to shout, whispering a prayer instead.

Then he was hit. A glancing blow to his legs that instantly resurrected the terror he was struggling to control. He shouted—a mighty bellow born of fear that roared across the water.

He didn't see the launch alter its course and head toward him; he was busy looking, feeling, checking. Were both his legs still attached? They were. When he raised his head from the water again, the launch was upon him, powerful engines throttled back, exhausts burbling in the water, anxious brown faces peering down, arms reaching for him.

Moments later, he lay limp and dripping on the deck of the launch. Safe.

"Sons-a-bitch," he heard someone shout. "Biggest damn hammerhead I ever saw." Bing De Leon.

The launch belonged to the Philippine Coast Guard. Aboard, besides Barney and De Leon, were a young Philippine Coast Guard officer in crisp khaki uniform, Lieutenant Esteban, and four dungaree-clad sailors. A web belt and holstered .45-caliber pistol was strapped to the young officer's waist. M-16 rifles, loaded magazines inserted, stood ready in

a rack attached to the bulkhead by the hatch and ladder leading to the below-decks cabin.

The launch rocked in the swells, engines idling, while Barney caught his breath, then described what had happened to him. "How did you happen to be here to save my skin?" he asked De Leon.

"I become suspicious when Imelda Romero visit the Chinaman next door to my shop," De Leon explained. "She come to his place about one hour after you return to hotel yesterday. And when she leave, Wong right away gets on two-way radio to *Tara*. It is conversation he have with Thomas Blade that make me worried."

"But how did you know about the radio conversation?" Barney asked.

"I find out just this morning when I talk to young woman who works for Wong—mother of boy Tessie watches," De Leon said. "I asked her why Imelda come to Wong's machine shop. She say she not hear what Imelda and Wong talk about, but she hear Wong talk on radio later. She say Wong tell Blade that he find out about 'agents' arriving on island. He say these agents plan to go to *Tara* tomorrow morning, but not to worry. He take care of them. Soon as I hear this, I come to Coast Guard station for help."

"We have been suspicious of the *Tara* for a long time," Lieutenant Esteban said. "We think the cargo she carries is something more than just Mr. Wong's machine parts. But until now, we have had no excuse to check her out."

"Drewett," Barney said suddenly. He struggled to his feet, bracing himself on the gunwale, shading his eyes from the sun, looking toward the black schooner. He saw that the pump boat was now tied up astern of the *Tara*—empty. No one was visible on *Tara's* weather decks. "They've got Drewett aboard," he said. "Let's get going."

At the officer's order, the coxswain pushed the throttles to their stops. Twin inbound engines roared in unison, and the craft surged ahead, cutting through the water, stern dug in, screws kicking up a tall roostertail in their wake. The sailors pulled M-16's from the rack and stood ready as the launch closed on the schooner.

Barney clung to the rail beside De Leon, anxious eyes searching the ship for signs of life. He was certain Drewett was aboard. Damn woman, he thought. Got herself into this mess trying to do a man's job. Now, helpless, she was a victim of the criminals who had conspired to murder him. Was she

still alive, held captive below decks?

A man suddenly appeared on the *Tara's* deck. A white man—big, long blond hair, shirtless. As Barney watched, the man spotted the approaching launch and quickly ducked back into the hatch from which he had emerged. Moments later, he was topside again, beside him the Filipino boatman and another shirtless Caucasian man—this one younger, slender, brown hair. The three men stood watching, hands on hips, as the launch, still several hundred yards away, sped toward them.

"Look," shouted De Leon, pointing. "The pump boat."

Barney shaded his eyes again, studying the outrigger craft which he saw was now drifting slowly away from *Tara's* stern. What the hell, he thought. Then he saw the figure crouched by the boat's midships hatch. Moments later, a puff of blue smoke shot from the hatch, and the ragged putt-putt of the pump boat's cranky engine echoed across the water, barely audible beneath the clamor of the launch's straining diesels.

The men aboard the *Tara* were running toward the big schooner's stern, shouting and waving their arms as the pump boat pulled away. The figure in

the boat was now stooped aft of the engine hatch. A hand grasped the bamboo tiller handle, swinging the bow of the boat about, heading toward the approaching Coast Guard launch.

"That your lady friend in the boat," De Leon yelled, grinning, clapping Barney on the back.

Barney shook his head in wonder, relief surging through him. The figure was indeed Sandra Drewett, standing now, hair whipping in the breeze, waving toward the launch.

The pump boat was soon alongside, rocking violently in the larger boat's wash. Drewett scrambled aboard as a sailor secured a tow line to the bow of the outrigger craft.

She immediately embraced Barney, eyes wet. "How?" she said. "I thought—"

"A helping hand from above, I suppose," he said, arm around her waist. "And from Bing and the Philippine Coast Guard."

Quickly he explained the sequence of events that had prompted De Leon to seek assistance from the Coast Guard. De Leon and Lieutenant Esteban crowded around them. "Please tell us what happened to you, Agent Drewett," the officer said.

"I guess we both dozed off on the way out to the *Tara*," Drew-

ett said, clutching Barney's arm. "I woke up just as the boatman bashed Barney with his rifle." She looked at Barney. "I'm sorry, Willis, but there was nothing I could do. He held the rifle on me while he rigged the cement block to your legs and pushed you over the side. I was sure I'd never see you again.

"After you were gone, we proceeded on to the *Tara*. There, Blade and Jones—if Jones is the younger guy's real name—took me below, roughed me up some and asked a lot of questions. The Australian, Blade, told me that it was all planned. The Filipino boatman, apparently a thug employed by this man Wong, was to finish you off, Willis, just as soon as we got far enough out in the bay so that there wouldn't be any witnesses. They figured they could find out what they wanted to know from me, have a little fun afterwards, then feed me to the sharks same as you."

"But why?" asked Barney. "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know where or how they got their information," Drewett replied, "but for some reason they had the notion that we're both U.S. narcotics agents working with the Philippine government." She turned to Lieutenant Esteban.

"Blade and Jones were concerned about that because down below on the *Tara* just about every square foot of space is packed with contraband drugs—mostly bags of cocaine, but also several big bales of marijuana. Must be tons of the stuff. That's why she's riding so low in the water."

A sailor was shouting, pointing toward the black schooner. "Damn," said Lieutenant Esteban. "She is getting under way."

Aboard the *Tara*, the younger Caucasian man and the Filipino boatman were manning the forward windlass, drawing the ship's dripping anchor from the bay. In the wheelhouse aft, the blond man stood at the wheel, manipulating the engine controls as the black schooner began to make way through the water.

Drewett laughed. "Don't worry," she told the officer. "She won't get far."

"What do you mean?" said Lieutenant Esteban.

"When Blade and Jones heard the launch coming," Drewett said, "they locked me in the head, then all three of them rushed up on deck. I used the metal toilet-paper roller and my shoe to tap out the door hinge pins. Then I doused some of the bales of marijuana with kerosene from the hurricane

lamps. And before I crawled out of the aft overhead hatch and down to the pump boat, I set fire to the whole thing."

"Sons-a-bitch," said De Leon, grinning again.

Muffled shouts from the schooner carried across the water. The men aboard were dashing around the decks, gesticulating frantically to each other as clouds of smoke rolled from the hatches. Flames flicked angrily from the portholes of the main cabin below the topside wheelhouse. The distinctive burnt-leaf odor of marijuana began to taint the air.

"Half the population of Palawan is going to get high this afternoon just breathing this stuff," said Drewett, a big smile on her face.

"Unfortunately," observed Lieutenant Esteban, "the evidence we need to prosecute these people is also going up in smoke."

Indeed, the fire was quickly consuming the *Tara*. She had gone dead in the water, her top decks aflame, enveloped in a billowing cloud of black smoke.

"I think *Tara* will sink before that happens," said Drewett. "I forgot to mention that I also pulled up the deck boards in the main cabin and opened the aft sea cocks."

"Hah," Esteban exclaimed, pointing toward the schooner.

"Yes. She's going down fast at the stern. Good work, Agent Drewett."

As Barney watched, the three men aboard *Tara* abandoned ship, jumping from the main deck, which was already awash. Seconds later, the black schooner's stern slid beneath the waves, her hull listing to port and bow thrust upwards, twin masts reaching toward the sea, the raging fire sizzling as it met water, smoke turning to steam. *Tara's* three sailors were stroking wildly away from the doomed schooner, trying to distance themselves from the powerful vortex the ship would create when it plunged to the bottom.

In less than a minute, the black ship was gone, the only sign of her existence the debris-strewn water, the cloud of smoke and steam that hung above. The swimmers had stopped to watch the ship go down. Now they swam slowly, reluctantly, toward the waiting launch.

The Filipino boatman was the first to be fished from the bay and pulled aboard. Next was the big blond man who cast a murderous look at Drewett as the Coast Guardsmen handcuffed him. "Bloody bitch," he grumbled. The Australian, Thomas Blade. Last was the

slender, brown-haired man, silent, sullen—Alex Jones.

Drewett touched Barney's arm. "Is that man Robert Ellis?" she asked.

Barney shook his head. "Never seen the guy before."

Barney and Drewett invited Bing De Leon and his family to join them for dinner on the verandah of the Bangkok Hotel that evening. "And bring along the young woman who tipped you off about what Wong and his gang were up to," Barney told his friend.

Imelda Romero had spared no effort to ensure that the dinner was successful. Imelda, Barney and Drewett discovered, had been on Wong's payroll for a long time. Her job had been simply to advise the Chinese—who apparently was on the lookout for narcotics agents—of all new arrivals on the island. Wong was especially interested in those Imelda thought might be something other than what they claimed to be. Imelda had not believed for a moment that Barney and Drewett were writers and had reported this to Wong. The big woman was much relieved that the local authorities had decided not to bring charges against her for the unknowing assistance she

had provided to the drug smugglers.

A long table covered by a white linen cloth had been positioned on the verandah near the kitchen. The table was set with the hotel's finest china and silver, usually reserved for special events held at the hotel by important local officials and politicians. A half-dozen uniformed waitresses stood ready to serve the party.

The De Leon family, all wearing their Sunday-go-to-Mass clothes, arrived at dusk. Barney and Drewett met their guests in the lobby. A slender young woman wearing a colorful blouse and skirt accompanied the family. She smiled shyly when Barney greeted them, holding tight to the shirt collar of a squirming boy, the boy Barney had seen at the Tropics Dive Shop the previous day.

De Leon introduced them. "This lady Miss Gloria Norte," he said. "The boy you already meet yesterday at my shop."

Barney and Drewett exchanged startled glances. "A pleasure meeting you, Miss Norte," Barney said, shaking the delicate hand she offered.

"Gloria know why you two are here," De Leon said. "I not tell you about her yesterday because I want to talk to her first."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Norte," said Drewett. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Let's go sit down," said Barney. "Our table's ready."

When all were seated, Imelda Romero, rocking on her heels near the kitchen, snapped her fingers. The waitresses immediately sprang into action, carrying to the table steaming trays of rice and pancit, platters of fried fish and chicken adobo, baskets of lumpia and pandisal bread, soft drinks for the children, and rice wine for the adults. When all had been served, the waitresses returned to their stations. Imelda Romero hovered nearby, arms crossed below her volleyball breasts, ready to direct her kitchen and dining room crew as necessary.

"Quite a day," said Barney, twisting pancit noodles around his fork.

"Yes," said Bing De Leon, spooning a helping of adobo onto his plate. "Wong, Blade, and Jones in jail. The Coast Guard and the Puerto Princesa police very pleased, and all of us are heroes. Lieutenant Esteban tell me that Wong was middleman for big drug dealer in Hawaii. Blade and Jones pick up cargoes of drugs from other smugglers in Gulf of Thailand, sail *Tara* back to Palawan, then wait until Wong

arrange by radio for offshore rendezvous with other boats which then take shipments of drugs to Hawaiian Islands." He winked at Drewett. "Maybe navy promote you for your part in this caper," he said.

Drewett took a sip from her wineglass. "It'll certainly look good in my next fitness report," she said. "But capturing drug smugglers isn't why Mr. Barney and I came to Puerto Princesa."

"I wish I could help you," said Gloria Norte, wiping adobo sauce from her son's chin with a cloth napkin. The boy glared at her and stuffed an entire pandisal roll into his mouth. "But I do not know about this letter to Robert's parents," his mother continued. "Robert dead. Drowned when he fall from his ship five years ago." Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. "He never get to see his son."

"The boy is Robert Ellis's son?" said Drewett.

Gloria nodded, wiping her eyes with the napkin. "His name is Bobby. I was pregnant with Bobby when Robert's ship leave Subic. Robert was going to go home to Iowa and tell his parents about me. He say to me that when his parents know about baby, they will let me come stay with them while he go to—"

"Diego Garcia," prompted Barney.

"Yes. Robert have orders to go there. He was going to get fiancée visa for me so I can come to States. He say he take leave and come home when I am there so we can be married. While I wait, I come back home to Puerto Princesa and pretty soon get job at Mr. Wong's shop."

"But Robert didn't make it back to the States," said Barney. "So all of this was a secret that died with him."

"I'd like to believe your story, Miss Norte," said Drewett. "But you are the only one who knew about Robert and his parents. You, or else Robert, who you say is dead, are the only ones who could have sent the letter to Mr. and Mrs. Ellis asking for money. There isn't any other solution to the puzzle."

"I think there is," said Barney, his eyes moving to young Tessie, who sat across the table from him. The teenager had been listening to the conversation, not touching her food. She looked away from Barney. "Why don't you tell us about it, Tessie," Barney said, not unkindly.

"Do you know something about this letter, Tessie?" Bing De Leon demanded when his daughter didn't answer. Lolita put her hand on her husband's

arm. The other children had stopped eating, eyes wide, watching their parents and older sister.

"I just wanted to go home to San Diego," the girl said quietly, tears in her eyes. "I needed a thousand dollars for the airplane ticket."

Her parents said nothing, stunned.

"Go on," said Barney, gently. "Tell us how you did it."

"I think I know," said Gloria. "Tessie is my friend. I tell her about Robert and me." She got out of her chair and knelt by Tessie's chair, hugging the sobbing girl's shoulders. "You get Mr. and Mrs. Ellis's address from my address book?"

Tessie nodded, wiping her eyes. "I sent the letter," she admitted. "I typed it on the typewriter at the shop so there wouldn't be any handwriting to give me away. Since I pick up your mail for you during the day, Gloria, I thought that when the check came I would just take it. I was going to sign the back myself, forge your signature." She looked at Drewett. "Will I have to go to jail?"

Drewett shook her head. "No harm has been done," she said. "In fact, maybe some good will come of this. I think that when Robert's parents find out they have a grandson, they are go-

ing to want to help Gloria and Bobby."

"Do you think so?" said Gloria. "I was afraid to write to them. I did not know them at all. And now, I have no job—"

"I'll call and talk to them for you," said Drewett. She looked at Barney. "How did you know?" she asked.

"I told you yesterday that I understood about Robert and Gloria, and about others with problems like theirs," Barney said. "Love is a pretty powerful emotion. Causes people to do some pretty drastic things sometimes. Right, Tessie?"

Tessie nodded. "I wanted to see my boyfriend back home. I never wanted to come here in the first place."

"We'll talk, Tessie," said Lolita. "Maybe there is something we can do. A girl your age should be in college. Right, Bing?" She poked her husband's arm.

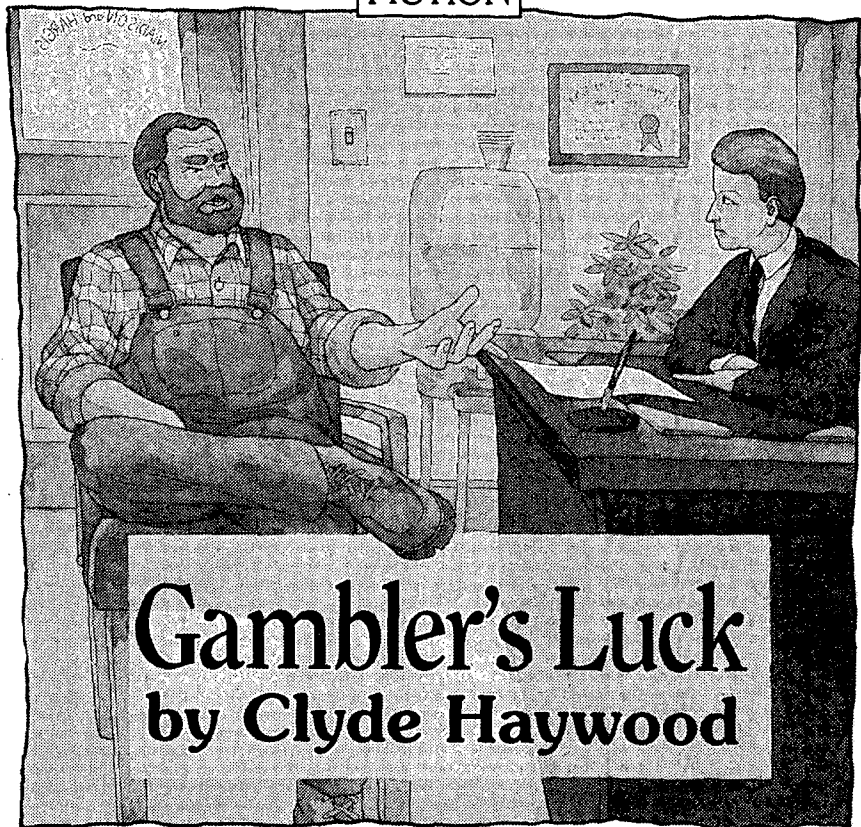
"Umm," said Bing, still frowning.

"I suspected the truth as soon as Bing introduced Gloria," Barney said. "Yesterday, when I saw the boy in the shop, he looked kind of familiar to me."

Drewett smiled. There was a warmth in her eyes Barney had seldom seen. "I'll not forgive you just yet for your sexist remarks, Willis Barney," she said. "But I will admit that there just might be a thing or two I still have to learn."

"Fair enough," said Barney.

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Gambler's Luck

by Clyde Haywood

I never really meant to be a criminal lawyer. It just happened to me. Oh, I meant to be a lawyer, all right. In fact, I already was a lawyer when it happened. I just didn't mean to be that kind of lawyer, and probably never would have if it hadn't been for a real strong moonshiner.

I had finished law school at U.N.C. and gone back to my

hometown. I started with Madison and Hargis, a ten-lawyer firm. That was pretty good size for Asheville in those days. Like most firms in small cities, they did a little general practice, but they specialized in representing insurance companies in civil litigation.

That's the kind of lawyer I meant to be. I was going to spend the rest of my working

life trying respectable automobile accident and civil contract cases. Maybe I'd stand for the legislature or the bench someday, but otherwise I'd be a dignified, uncontroversial civil-side lawyer. I was as sure of the future as you can only be when you haven't had a very long past.

Of course, I was just an associate. That meant I didn't own any of the firm, or get any of the profits. The partners just paid me a salary, and I worked for them. The first year I prepared papers and hunted witnesses for the partners' cases. They said they didn't expect associates to produce a lot of clients, which was a good thing for me because I didn't produce any. That was a little disappointing. Coming back to where I grew up, I had hoped I could produce something. I was afraid the partners had hoped that, too, when they hired me.

Then one day it happened.

The receptionist buzzed me and said, "There's a Mr. Ratcliff here to see you."

"Who?" I wasn't expecting anyone, and I didn't know any Mr. Ratcliff.

"A man who says his name is Jim Bob Ratcliff. I'm going to bring him back," she answered.

Several seconds later she ushered into my office a big,

black-bearded man in bib overalls. He came in talking—loud.

"Mr. Bearden," he thundered, "I picked you for a lawyer because I heard you're old man Gabe Bearden's grandson, and he used to buy a whole lot of liquor off of me before he died."

The receptionist was still standing there, and there was a secretary right outside my office. I could hear them both giggling as I quickly closed the door. It was pretty funny, I guess. I'd spent twelve months trying to convince the staff I really was a lawyer, and when I finally brought in a client of my own, it was a redneck bootlegger who only come to me because my granddaddy liked his liquor.

As I walked back behind my desk, I motioned Ratcliff to a chair opposite. He settled his huge frame into it and poked a big hairy paw into the zipper pocket of his overalls.

I guess I ought to say right off that real life mountain moonshiners are not much like Snuffy Smith in the funny papers. They're not lazy little guys at all. Moonshining is hard work. An oldtimey still hand like Ratcliff has to cut and split and haul hardwoods to fire his still.

He has to carry sacks of sugar and cornmeal across the

hills and back into the woods like a pack horse. And he was to run the ridges like a goat to stay ahead of the law. Ratcliff was pushing fifty, but he looked in better shape than a lot of athletes. The biceps stretching his red flannel sleeves looked as muscular as a mule's hind legs.

It was Ratcliff's physical prowess that had a lot to do with my becoming a criminal lawyer. But that came later. In the meantime, he pulled a warrant out of his pocket and spread it on my desk.

As I read the document, Ratcliff told me about it. "The feds caught me making liquor last year," he announced. "And I had lawyer Bob Butler. He got me put on probation. But now they've caught me doing it again, and they're wanting to do what they call 'violate me' and put me in prison, so I come to you."

I asked what seemed a logical question. "Why didn't you go back to Butler? He's one of the best criminal lawyers around here. He got old Judge Samson Moore to put you on probation instead of throwing you in prison. From what I hear that's about like getting a bulldog to slobber on your shoe instead of biting your leg off."

"That's what I figured, too," he said. "But see—uh, it's like this. You know C. L. Winters?"

I nodded. "I know who he is." Everybody did.

Winters was the closest thing Asheville had to a godfather. For years he had run a nightclub over the ridge in Gibson County. He openly sold an ocean of hard liquor at a time when only beer and wine were legal in North Carolina.

He even ran roulette wheels and tables. He bought the necessary gambling tax stamps to stay out of federal trouble, even though the stamp purchases were public record and gambling was against state law.

Everybody was sure he was paying off the sheriff in Gibson County. But then in the late sixties, Congress changed the gambling laws so that federal authorities could help crack down on local rackets. About the same time Gibson County got a new sheriff, and Winters had to go away for a few years.

When he got out, he never operated openly again. But he was rumored to be bankrolling about everything that was both illegal and profitable.

Ratcliff went on. "Well, Mr. Winters took an interest in my case."

That had to mean Winters *owned* an interest in the case.

"He said not to get Butler this time because he costs too much and it didn't make no difference anyhow. He said that

when they got you on a probation violation they don't have to give you a whole new trial. They just tell Judge Moore what happened, and he sends you to prison. So he said I didn't need no lawyer.

"But I asked around, and some other moonshiners said that if you've got a lawyer sometimes he can get the judge to knock a little of the time off. So I told Winters I wanted a lawyer. And he said, okay, but it had to be somebody cheap that would do it for two hundred dollars. I figured that since you was young and all, you might do it for that."

I would. The firm wasn't counting on me to get anything from my clients, or even to have clients.

Ratcliff's unannounced visit to my office was on Wednesday afternoon. The probation violation hearing was set for Monday morning. I didn't have much time. Since there wasn't much I could do, it didn't greatly matter.

I did need to find out what went on at a federal probation hearing. That's not the sort of thing you can look up, and nobody in the firm had any experience in federal criminal law. But it happened that one of the probation officers—a Mr. Sluder—was an old family friend. I went to see him, hop-

ing I could learn enough to keep from looking like a complete fool in court.

Mostly he verified what Ratcliff had found out from the other moonshiners.

"On a probation violation," Sluder said, "the prosecution doesn't have to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt. You don't get a jury. The probation officer just gets up and tells the judge what happened. You can ask him questions if you want to, but old Judge Moore won't like it very much if you do. He's going to send your client off anyway."

"How can I do him any good?" I asked.

"Well, Judge Moore likes lawyers who do things right," Sluder said. "'Right' means his way. So if you don't ask any hard questions and just get up and give a little spiel about how your client is really a pretty good guy, he'll knock six months off the time.

"See, he always gives everybody a little more time than he thinks they need, so he can do that. But when he starts telling your client what a good job you've done, that's his farewell speech. Your man's fixing to go away. But he knocks that six months off and says how good a job you did so maybe the defendant won't file a writ for incom-

petent counsel when he gets to prison."

I thanked him and left. Monday came, and so did the hearing.

When Ratcliff and I got to federal court that day, we found the courtroom full of marshals, FBI agents, and other law enforcement personnel. I knew they weren't there because of my client. He was big and scary-looking, but a simple moonshiner doesn't generate that kind of security. I asked Sluder what else was going on.

He told me. "A jury convicted two bigtime bank robbers a few days ago, and they're bringing them back in for sentencing before Ratcliff's hearing."

So we had to sit through Judge Moore's preaching at the two for thirty minutes about how bad they were. Then he sent them off for twenty years apiece, which probably got the idea across better than the sermon. The marshals hustled them out the back of the courtroom to the lockup. The extra security left, and it was our turn.

The probation officer read his report, which I had seen on Friday. He said that the two Treasury agents had lain in the woods for three nights and watched my client come and go until they finally managed to

track him to a spring where he was firing up an old fashioned copper still. So, being nice guys, instead of bringing a whole new moonshining charge against him, they just decided to revoke the probation he was still under from the last time they caught him. Not to mention that it was a lot easier that way.

I didn't try to disprove any of this because I didn't want to make the judge mad. Besides, I couldn't have done it if I had tried. I just did what Sluder had suggested. I made a little speech telling Judge Moore all the good things I could think of about my client.

I pointed out that he hadn't resisted arrest, or at least not very much. I noted that he had never been on welfare. I knew Judge Moore would like that. I even reminded him that Jim Bob was using a good old copper still and not a car radiator like so many of the new breed of moonshiners. That way his liquor might be non-taxpaid, but it wouldn't have lead in it that could kill people or cause brain damage.

Next it was the judge's turn. He told Ratcliff, "I gave you a chance the last time you were here. You haven't taken advantage of it. There are two years hanging over you like the blade of a guillotine."

He paused for effect. I doubt if Jim Bob had any idea what a guillotine was, but I felt the effect.

The judge went on for ten minutes about how bad Jim Bob had been. Then he started talking about what a good job I had done. One of the probation officers sidled over to my table like he was bringing me some papers.

"That's his farewell speech," he whispered. "Your man is about to go away."

He did. The judge pronounced the judgment. "Because of the things your attorney has had to say on your behalf, I will reduce your sentence by six months. James Robert Ratcliff, I order that you be confined in such institution as the attorney general may direct for a period of eighteen months. He'll be in your custody, marshal."

The marshal took poor old Jim Bob back to the lockup where the bank robbers had gone earlier. Judge Moore recessed court, and I wandered on back toward the cell to tell my client that I was sorry he had to go away, and to ask if there was anything I could do for his family while he was gone.

I entered the lockup area from a courthouse hallway. I stepped into a twenty-by-forty room cut in half longwise by a

row of bars. When I walked in, two deputy marshals were over by the bars. One of them had the cell door open. He was chaining my client between the two bank robbers so the Marshal Service could transport them all together. The other deputy was at the end of the room with his pistol drawn. The first deputy had all three prisoners handcuffed. He was hooking them all together with waist chains.

These deputies were more accustomed to peaceful moonshiners than desperate bank robbers. The man with the pistol was standing right in front of a door that opened inward from the marshal's main office. We had a new marshal in the district right then. Just as the deputy by the cell finished chaining his prisoners, the marshal came charging in like a kid getting home from school. He banged the door against the deputy with the gun.

The door knocked the gun to the floor. It went skittering straight across the room. One of the robbers grabbed it. He whipped it straight up under the chaining deputy's chin.

"Don't nobody move," he said, "or this man's going to die."

We all stood as still as deer under a poacher's light. The robber with the gun looked at

his buddy. "What are we going to do now?" he asked.

"Get the keys, fool," the other instructed.

Jim Bob grabbed the keys from the deputy. Then he yelled at the robbers, "Let's get out of here and take the deputy with us. We'll need a hostage."

Jim Bob had taken charge. He took his own cuffs off. Then he told the robber with the gun, "Stick your hands out here and I'll get your cuffs off."

The man did it. When his hands went out, the gun wasn't pointed at the deputy's head. Ratcliff's big right hand struck like a giant snake—twice. The first time he swung down on the man's gun hand. Then the pistol wasn't pointed at anybody but the floor.

That instant he smashed the robber's hand against the cell bars. The gun hit the floor. Ratcliff kicked it across the room, back to the deputy who had dropped it.

The deputy with the gun shouted, "Everybody stay still." He told the other deputy, "Unhook those chains and get the two bad ones back in the cell."

He did. The new marshal who had caused all the trouble was standing there whimpering, "What can I do? What can I do?"

Nobody was answering, so I did. "Run and tell the judge

what's going on," I said. "And ask him not to sign the commitment order on Ratcliff."

As soon as everything had calmed down a little, I made sure that the judge heard exactly what had happened. Then I asked him to modify the judgment on Ratcliff. He called us all back into court and asked my client, "Jim Bob, what were you thinking of, man? That's the bravest thing I've heard of lately."

Jim Bob said, "I couldn't let them get away. Nobody ain't safe with criminals like that on the loose."

"Well, since I haven't signed the order revoking your probation, I believe I'll just not sign it at all," said the judge.

I saw my chance for something even better. "Your honor," I put in, "I move the court to enter a modified judgment canceling the balance of the probation. The purpose of probation is rehabilitation. I submit that this man is rehabilitated."

The judge agreed and told the clerk to draw up such a judgment. The deputies took Ratcliff out to their office—not to the lockup—to get the paperwork for his release. This time I waited in the hall. An older man who had been in the courtroom through the whole proceedings approached me. I

recognized him from newspaper pictures as C. L. Winters.

"Mr. Bearden," he said, "you just became the first lawyer ever to get a probation violator free in Judge Moore's court. Congratulations."

"Thanks." I said and turned away like I had some other business to attend to, even though I didn't.

"I'm going to send you an awful lot of criminal cases," he said to my passing back.

I stopped. I had never seriously thought about doing criminal defense work, and really didn't know if I wanted to do any more. I did know that I wasn't interested in being the mouthpiece for the mountain version of a mobster.

I turned to face the tempter and tell him to get behind me. "Mr. Winters," I began.

He interrupted. "Call me 'Cool,'" he said, wrapping his tongue around the word like it was an ice cream cone. "All my friends do."

"Mr. Winters," I began again, trying to sound a lot steadier than I felt, "I don't think I'm the man you're looking for."

He chuckled and held up his hand like a cop stopping a line of traffic. "I understand, son.

You've got scruples. I like that in a lawyer. Makes it less likely that he's cheating me. I'm not planning to own you. I just mean that I'm going to recommend you to people I know that get in trouble. You won't owe me anything. Shucks, pretty soon you'll have such a reputation you won't care whether I refer people or not."

I shook my head. "It's not just that, Mr. Winters. I was just lucky today. I'm not that good. I'm not really a criminal lawyer."

This time he didn't just chuckle. He laughed out loud. "I know that. But, son, I'm a gambler."

"Pshaw," I said, like I was surprised.

He ignored my interruption and went on. "I've watched a lot of criminal lawyers. Defending criminal cases against the U.S. government is a lot like playing against the house. It's not so much being good as it is being lucky and knowing when to get a bet down.

"You got a bet down today as pretty as I ever saw. And you're as lucky as a dealer with an extra thumb. Andy Bearden, you are a criminal lawyer."

Twenty years and a few hundred criminal cases later, I still wonder if he was right.

FICTION



A Missing Person

by Ashley Curtis



LICENSED TO ONZ.ORG

“I’m afraid it’s my mistake that she’s coming at all,” Joe Dibbs confessed. “She called me a few weeks ago, and I just assumed she’d been invited. She was in the group, after all.”

“It’s not your fault,” Alicia said. “You couldn’t have known.”

The black-faced interstate wound its way through the hills of southern Vermont. John Arnold, Alicia’s husband, was driving much too fast. His deeply wrinkled, rugged face was grimly set, his jaw clamped shut. He was not looking forward to the reunion. An outsider, Joe thought, someone brought into the group through marriage. Even though he sang a fine contratenor, he would feel like he didn’t belong.

“Well, she won’t sing,” Alicia said, and sighed. “We tried that last time, and she’s gotten a lot worse since then. Or so I hear.”

She turned and looked out the window, watched the trees and pastures slipping by, the little farms with their black and white cows. She had reasons of her own for not wanting June to show up at the “reunion” they were having at Bill and Charlotte’s new place in Vermont. June had acted so strange—so venomous—the last few times she’d seen her. Alicia was afraid of her. June had dropped out of medical school, inexplicably, two years before, and then married a junior high school principal, Don Smith. He was short, squat, and bearded, ten years older than she, and one of the most boring people Alicia had ever met. No one knew why June had married him, especially since she seemed to despise him. But she had changed so much that no one even pretended to know her any more.

Nobody really wanted to see June.

It had been hard enough for Alicia and John to arrange to have these four days off. A resident in pediatrics in New Haven, four days in a row were practically a glimpse of paradise for Alicia; and John was giving up a class he should have taught at the Yale summer school, which was bad form and would not help his prospects if anyone found out. It would have been worth it for a reunion of the “Swans ’n’ Swains,” their college a cappella singing group—well worth it—if June had not been coming. But she was.

“I suppose there’s nothing we can do about it,” she said, turning her head so she could look around the head rest and see Joe in the back seat.

Joe shrugged.

"She can't be that bad," he said. He couldn't know, of course, since he hadn't seen her for years. He had heard from her only once—and that, admittedly, had been the strangest phone call he had ever received.

Joe had been teaching school in Brasilia for three years now, trapped in a contract that he never should have signed. On the night she called he had been depressed, as usual, wondering again how he had ended up in the capital of Brazil, a city with no history, a planner's paradise of concrete blocks and diplomatic emptiness. Not the raw, salsa-driven, dirty Latin town he had pictured himself living in. She had called out of the blue, without any warning, and her voice had reached out to him with perfect clarity from the cheap plastic receiver, as if she were calling from the next room. How was he doing? How were things? Then the eerie repetition of his name, and that screwy question.

He hadn't mentioned it to anyone. He almost did, now, but it didn't feel quite right.

"What surprises me," he said instead, "is that Bill ever moved out of the city. He's not exactly the woodsy type."

"No," she said. "He did love New York."

"Probably made some shady deal," John muttered. "Got out before it got too hot."

"At least he got away from June," Alicia said. "Apparently she used to visit him. They lived right around the block."

She emitted a little laugh.

"Maybe that's why he left!"

John stared straight ahead, driving furiously; Joe slouched back, depressed. Alicia shrugged. She looked out the window indifferently at the green hills rolling by.

"Is Jose coming?" Joe asked finally.

Alicia shook her head.

"Couldn't," she said. "But John sang at Princeton. He can easily take Jose's part. And Surrey's wife, Celine, can do June's when she refuses to sing."

"I didn't know Surrey was married."

Alicia laughed.

"A big corporate lawyer like Surrey? Living in Paris? Of course he's found himself a little Frenchwoman to share his bed."

She sounded bitter.

"Is this the exit?" John asked. His face was more dour than ever, as if he had been hoping that the exit would never come, that it

had been wiped off the road—and now he saw his hopes dashed by an ugly highway sign.

“Thirty-one,” Alicia confirmed wryly. “My age and yours.”

She turned back to look at Joe.

“Still can’t believe we’re in our thirties,” she said. She shook her head, as if she really couldn’t believe it.

Joe didn’t know how to reply.

Bill’s new log home—everything in this marriage seemed to be Bill’s, though it should have been Charlotte’s just as much—was at the end of a steep gravel driveway that curved some three hundred yards through the woods. The driveway itself was off a rutted dirt road, three and a half miles of which they had just driven, with John muttering something about the suspension each time they hit a particularly brutal pothole. As the driveway leveled out, they emerged into a clearing. The house was large, but built in the fashion of an old cabin, with logs crossing at the corners like fingers just beginning to pray. The driveway widened to a parking area under the screened porch. On the other side of the parking area was a dark, round pond, about twenty yards in diameter; and on the other side of the pond, just at the edge of the woods, was a small outbuilding, a red clapboard house in miniature with a gabled roof and a small screened porch; and all about them a smooth lawn opened up, spreading around and behind the house before meeting the thick woods, now a splendid harmony of greens in the afternoon sunlight, rolling back into the hills around them.

Bill Paige, his thick red hair still capping off his round, proud head, stood at the edge of the driveway. He was looking over the little stretch of lawn that sloped down to the pond, gesticulating as he explained something to Surrey and a younger woman next to him. Surrey looked distinguished, his dark hair graying with dignity; his clothes, even his vacation khakis and polo shirt, were well tailored and expensive. The girl next to him was indeed beautiful—blonde, with shoulder-length hair and deep green eyes. She had a lithe little figure, her pert breasts teasingly unharnessed in a dark blue T-shirt with a white design on it: slender, interlacing trees.

“Great to see you all!” Bill exclaimed with his usual enthusiasm. Charlotte tripped down the stairs from the porch as the car pulled up, and Surrey shook hands gravely, meaningfully, kissing Alicia on both cheeks. He introduced Celine, who was much younger than

the rest of them. They all stood in a circle, not quite knowing what to do. Then John commented on what a beautiful place Bill had found, and Bill, in a low voice that implied he was about to divulge confidential information, said he would tell them how he got it for an unbelievably low price.

He started telling his story, and Alicia, who couldn't have thought of anything less interesting to talk about, paid no attention. She looked instead at Charlotte: thin, too thin Charlotte, in a white sundress that didn't quite fit her, her brown hair, which used to be luxurious and long, barely reaching to her shoulders, dim and lifeless. Alicia thought that Charlotte had begun wilting almost as soon as they had left college, and every year she looked thinner, more wrinkled, less present. She wondered if Charlotte was sick.

Charlotte was staring at Bill with her weak brown eyes, and Alicia followed her gaze, finally, and began listening to his story.

"So this guy's wife—he has a wife and kids—goes swimming every day, in the pond. Dives in off that little diving board, just a board nailed on a stump at the edge, you see it there. Swims back and forth a few times, you know, for exercise. And one day the guy comes back from work, with the kids, and she's not there.

"Her clothes are there, right where she always took them off. The towel was ready for her, hanging on the back of the garden chair. She swam in the buff, you see, so there was no bathing suit to look for. Goodlooking woman—I saw a picture once, by accident. So everything's there, but just no wife.

"The guy searches for her, calls for her. The kids don't know what's going on. She's nowhere. After a while he's calling the police.

"Well, they think the logical thing to think. They think she dived in, got some kind of cramp, and drowned. They call in divers, and they dive down there, with big lights—you can see how dark the water is, sort of murky, on account of it's not still water, it's fed by that stream, goes out the culvert there—but it's not a big pond, so they should find her soon. But they don't find her at all.

"They keep looking. I mean, they're looking systematically, they're pacing the thing out, they're covering all the bases. They don't find anything, but when they're looking down there on the bottom, they notice something strange. When they put their feet down, or their hands, down on the bottom of the pond, the muck gives in, it sort of tries to suck them in. It's a sort of quicksand

down there, or something like that. So what they do, they take a big sort of dummy, size of a woman, just as heavy, and they drop it in. Then they go look for *that*.

"Nothing doing. This is a pond where, you drop something in, it's gone. G-O-N-E. You don't find it again. We ought to use it to get rid of all those atom bombs they're getting rid of now. Sort of a black hole."

"You mean—she's still down there?" John asked, incredulous.

Bill laughed.

"I don't think there's much left of her," he said, mocking. "It was a year ago it happened. I imagine she disintegrated pretty fast in there. Maybe a bone or two, deep down. It's nothing to us. But you can imagine, this guy, with these kids and all—he wanted out of here. Wanted to get rid of the place, real fast, no matter what the price. I paid less than half of what it's worth. Isn't that right, Charl?"

Charlotte nodded meekly as a visible shiver ran up her spine. It wasn't her idea, Alicia thought. Nor was anybody in the circle, except Bill, looking particularly cheery. More unsettled, or embarrassed. Bill had always been so crude, insensitive.

"Just shows you—you got to be at the right place at the right time. That's the art of life," he said.

"Sounds like she was in the *wrong* place," John Arnold muttered. A great start to a lovely weekend, he thought to himself. And June's not even here yet. He wondered if anyone higher up would have noticed the empty classroom, the students streaming out at the wrong time.

They got a tour of the grounds. The little red building was half a guestroom and half a sugarhouse, where the previous owner had boiled down the sap from the modest number of maples he'd tapped on the property. Bill said he planned to do it himself that spring.

"June and Don will sleep here," he commented.

No one said anything to that.

Next he took them up a slope behind the house to a huge, ordered stack of wood that rose well above their heads: a bonfire, ready to be lit. It looked almost like a little cabin, it was so big. But Bill never did anything small.

Then the house itself. On the screened porch, a futon mattress was rolled up into a couch. This was for Surrey and Celine.

Inside the front door was a big room, divided in its center by a large chimney of gray stones. To the right was the kitchen area,

to the left a sort of living room, from which a large, many-paned window looked out onto the screened porch. A sofa rested right under the window. It folded out into a bed, reserved for Joe.

"And now the upstairs. One thing you'll notice, this house is creaky. You can't go up or downstairs but everyone in the house wakes up. And the floors, by the way, are unbelievably thin. So no hanky-panky tonight, guys, 'cause there ain't no privacy."

He laughed jovially.

At the top of the stairs a room gave off to the left: Bill's office. It was cluttered up with legal textbooks and business magazines. To the right were two more rooms: the big one, looking out over the pond, belonged to Bill and Charlotte; the other, over the kitchen and facing out back, would be for Alicia and John.

"Got the songbooks right here," Bill pointed out as they walked back down the stairs. "Every single part. Right and ready for tonight."

They heard the sound of tires crunching on gravel, then an engine cutting off.

June had arrived.

There was something you forgot about June, Alicia realized as she coldly kissed her cheek. Something you forgot in her impossible moods, her snappishness, her general craziness.

At least, it was something that a woman would forget. She wasn't sure about the men.

June was beautiful. More than beautiful. Her beauty was special, godly, overpowering.

It was hard to place just what kind of face she had. It had a hint of Asian in it, perhaps even of Indian: the skin was definitely darker than Caucasian, had a sallowness, a tawnyiness that went just further than Mediterranean olive. The eyes were ever so slightly slitted, and the curve with which the edge rose was the same subtle stroke you would admire in a painting by a master. The white of her eyes, against that skin, was dazzlingly pure, and the soft, wispy, almost translucent lines, economical and smooth, that painted in her nose, her cheekbones, her delicate jaw seemed almost to smell of something naked, inviting, tasty to the touch. She stood up majestically, stepping out of the driver's seat, and announced:

"So. You see I've finally passed my driver's test. All by myself."

The *all by myself* was unmistakably addressed to Alicia. June's eyes had found her, focused right in on her, to double the innuendo. Probably no one else had noticed. But Alicia cursed under her breath.

"So what have you picked up, Surrey?" June let drop as she walked past him, in a murmur just loud enough for everyone to hear. "Nice little piece of goods."

Bill started making saving noises, welcoming her, pointing out the sugarhouse to Don, who stood frozen and embarrassed in the middle of the group. He helped Don with the suitcases, two pale blue solid things with little wheels. As they carried them, Bill could be heard repeating how he'd got the house so cheap. This time it was not with pride, though, but simply to make noise.

June had taken Surrey's arm and was letting him lead her up the steps towards the house. Celine trailed behind, looking mystified. As they reached the corner, June turned back to look at Joe, standing in the driveway with Alicia.

"So, Joseph," she called. "Back from your adventure? Brasilia, Brazil? Was it sterile enough for you? Rich little Brazilian boys? Ambassadors' brats?"

She let out a condescending little laugh.

"I suppose someone's got to do it, though. Eh, Surrey? Isn't that your philosophy—capitalist tool? Eh? Close your eyes and count your pennies?"

She laughed flirtatiously. Joe and Alicia turned away and looked down at the black pond, the diving board just below them, the reeds, glittering in the last rays of sun, on the opposite side where the brook came in and fed it.

"She's gotten even worse," Alicia muttered.

Joe shook his head in despair. It was not going to be the weekend he had hoped for.

Gavin McCloud was the chief of police in Hansor, Vermont, which meant, as he liked to say, he was the chief of himself. There was not a lot of crime in Hansor: sometimes trouble with a dog license, sometimes a car parked where it shouldn't be during a heavy snow. Occasionally some rowdies wanted more beer than they ought to have down at the Big Red Restaurant, where Ellie Morton had no intention of serving it to them. This is a peaceable community, she'd say, without a need for any miscreants—and Gavin would go and back her up. The

most mysterious thing he'd ever had to deal with was the woman-eating silt down at the bottom of Paul Harkins' pond—and there wasn't much to do, there, after they'd dropped in that dummy and seen it disappear.

The closest he had come to bigtime crime was the occasional conversation with Max Fremont. Fremont had been a New York cop before retiring early and moving to Hansor with his wife and their two cats. "I'd seen enough," he always said. "By the time I was twenty-five, I'd seen too much. I don't think I retired too early. I retired thirty years too late." Gavin had had him over for drinks a couple of times, and they'd also met at the Big Red. Fremont, he had discovered, had been more than just a cop—an inspector pretty high up in Homicide, though he didn't like to talk about it. Loosened up with a couple of drinks, he had told Gavin stories that he'd had to think about for a couple of nights before putting them to rest—and they still came back, sometimes. Gavin was just as glad he worked in Hansor; the job here suited his temperament just fine.

He put his feet up on the coffee table and flicked the TV on. The Republican convention. All those funny hats, sleepy babies, people up on stage giving speeches that no one listened to. It seemed a silly way to go about it. Ellie Morton at the Big Red Restaurant would not think much of it, that was for sure. He flicked the television off and picked up his crime magazine. He figured it was good to stay in touch.

They had made it through dinner, through the thin soup that Charlotte had prepared, the swordfish steaks that Bill had grilled, the Chardonnay that Surrey had talked on and on about. They had made it through, but barely: the sweat balls beaded on Bill's forehead; John Arnold's jaw set ever tighter; Joe's feelings of personal failure deepened as he realized he couldn't even have a decent weekend with his friends. They made it through only because June backed off from her hostile comments and centered her attentions more and more on Surrey. She was definitely unbalanced, Alicia thought, as she watched her flirting openly, embarrassing everyone with her seductive laughs and the way she found every excuse to touch Surrey's hand, to brush his shoulder. Celine had turned a sickly pale, said nothing, sat stiffly, miserably. The only one who didn't seem to mind was Surrey, who played along at the game, and no one could tell if he was unaware

of what was happening, or flattered by it, or just plain drunk. No one had seen Surrey for several years, and he had always been the most unfeeling of them all.

Bill had been planning what he considered a true Vermont desert—now he thought they'd skip the Ben and Jerry's altogether. He wanted to get that bonfire lit, fast, pull out the songbooks, start the singing. He knew she would leave them, then—she had long refused to sing—and they would be alone, harmonizing under a warm and starry sky, recovering something of their better past.

They left the dishes in the sink. The others all seemed to have read Bill's intention: they took the songbooks hastily and marched up the hill as if they were escaping from the plague. Bill lit the fire; it roared up, hot and yellow, into the night air. They had to stand back several yards from it so as not to burn up. Bill blew the little pitch pipe, hardly audible above the roar of the flames, and they hummed in unison, then stretched out on the intervals they had once been so used to. June stood on one side of Surrey, Celine on the other; only Don stood away from the group, a look of pain and misery on his dark little face.

John Arnold studied the "Swans 'n' Swains" songbook, marked "Jose," that he was holding in his hands. He had been warned that Jose was the weakest singer in the group, that he was really an actor, who sometimes did pantomimes while the others sang. Still, he hadn't expected such a simple, meager part. It made him angry. He had at least been looking forward to the singing. Now even that was gone.

"I guess I'll be going," Don called to them. "Not much of a singer. Guess I'll go to bed and read."

Alicia watched him disappear behind the fire, heading down the slope towards the sugarhouse; she saw the lights come on, saw him draw the curtains. She stepped back even farther from the fire. It was too big, too hot.

They sang the first song, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover." John sang his part well, Joe Dibbs thought—better than Jose had ever done. Celine was on key, but not nearly rich enough. Here, if nowhere else, they missed June's voice.

As the others sang, June made a show of writing on a slip of paper with a yellow pencil stub. When they finished the song, she conspicuously slipped it into Surrey's pocket. Then she stepped away from them.

"Have a nice sing," she called sarcastically over the noise of the fire. "I'm going to bed with my husband."

Thank God, Bill thought. Everybody thought. And tomorrow he would have the guts to make her leave.

June started around the fire to the house. She walked slowly, then turned, stepped close, and stared into the flames. They were on the other side of it now: she couldn't see them any more, only heard their voices, barely, singing over the loud roar of Bill's monstrous conflagration.

She stood there, blinking into the fire, until it got too hot even for her. It was so hot it felt like someone slapping at her face, beating her skin raw with a rubber switch. She would turn around now; she would head down to the sugarhouse. There she would wait, and see.

Joe Dibbs slept badly, if he slept at all. He lay still on the sofa, waiting for day to come. He had made up his mind to leave, which wasn't easy since he didn't even have his own car. He would make up some excuse, which everyone would see through, and ask for a ride to the nearest bus station. Or maybe others would be leaving, too. There was no point in staying here.

He wondered what had happened to Don and June. He hoped they'd both drowned in that damned pond. Charlotte had remembered, after they'd come down from singing, that she'd forgotten to give them towels; she sent Bill down to deliver them, since the lights were still on in the sugarhouse. Bill expected to hear them going at it like cats and dogs; instead, he heard nothing. He looked in, but neither June nor Don was in the bedroom. He laid the towels on the rumpled bed. The bathroom door was open, but he could see, in the mirror, that there was no one in there, either.

What the hell would they be doing outside in the middle of the night?

A noise broke in on Joe's tired reflections. He lay still and listened. It was coming from the porch. Someone was getting up.

He rolled over onto his stomach and pushed himself up slightly, so he could just see over the back of the sofa and through the window. It was Surrey. He was walking carefully, quietly, towards the door. He opened it, stepped out, slowly let it close.

He was taking her bait. What a fool. With Celine in bed next to him, he was going out to June. But he had always been like that, the playboy of the group. . . .

Joe slumped down again and sighed. He would, himself, give anything to have his own Celine, and here was this guy blowing her off, his own wife, for a crazy woman, just because her skin was beautiful. It was unfair how things worked out.

He heard another noise and turned around again. He hoped that it was Surrey coming back, back from a piss in the woods or a look at the stars.

Instead he saw the slender figure of Celine, wearing nothing but an extra long, white T-shirt, standing at the porch door like a Renaissance angel. She held her hand up to her mouth and looked out nervously over the driveway. Then she pushed the screen door open and stepped outside.

As he stared out at the empty porch and heard the footsteps fading into the night, June's voice came back to him; over the telephone in Brazil. Joe Dibbs, Joe Dibbs, she had whispered kindly, repeating his name, softly, like a mantra. Joe Dibbs, Joe Dibbs. What would you think, Joe Dibbs? What would you think? Someone who dropped a baby on the floor, who let it fall, slip easily between the luscious, bloody fingers like a greased rod in a hole? What would you think, Joe Dibbs? Joe Dibbs . . .

He had asked her what she was talking about. She had hung up the phone.

He shook himself to try to get rid of her. He closed his eyes and summoned up Celine again, moving in that skimpy T-shirt to the door: her tight breasts, the slim motions of her hips, the scuffle of her bare feet on the floor. He wanted to get up and go and find her, do something with her. She was French. He wished . . . but then he wished a lot of things. And wishing didn't get him anywhere.

Max Fremont poured an extra large serving of 9-Lives into each of the two cat dishes on the porch. It was six thirty in the morning, and there was little traffic on the stretch of Route 14 that passed in front of them. Mary, as usual, was still asleep. His first chore of the day accomplished, he would perk the coffee now.

He took great pleasure now in simple things: the white clapboard house, built in 1894, which he had finished painting the previous autumn; the breeze that swayed the fullness of the sugar maples; the little chores he had to do to stay on top of it all. He even enjoyed going to the dump, dropping the bottles in the various bins at the new recycling center. It was a completely different life from the

one he had lived up until two years ago, and it seemed to him that it was exactly the life that he had always yearned for. He would pour the water, load the filter, flip the switch on the coffeemaker with the same feeling of relaxed enjoyment with which he overfed the cats.

He had a measuring cup of ground coffee in one hand and a plain white filter in the other when the phone rang. A phone call at an odd hour always worried him: he felt a flash of panic that something had happened to his son, his daughter-in-law, or his six-month-old granddaughter. He debated how he should put down the equipment in his hands, delaying the inevitable; and then he simply laid it on the table and answered the phone.

"Inspector Fremont?"

It was Gavin. Gavin was the only person who still called him inspector. It was sort of touching.

"Sorry to bother you at this hour, sir. I've just had a strange call, and thought you might . . . want to come along with me. That is, I wonder if you would."

"What is it?" Fremont asked, sitting himself down comfortably in the easy chair next to the phone.

"Well, you know the pond I was telling you about? Where that woman disappeared?"

"I remember, yes."

"Well, another woman's missing, the same place. Different people there now, of course."

"You don't think she's just gone for a walk?"

"Well, of course, it's the most likely thing, in a way, sir, with a missing person, I know. But I got the feeling from this call—there's something funny going on."

"Oh?"

"Well, they were having this houseparty, you see. Sort of a reunion. The woman and her husband were sleeping in the sugar-house—you remember I described it to you. The husband went to bed before the others—they were all some kind of a singing group, singing together, and he wasn't in it. And the husband says she never came home last night."

Fremont nodded and waited. There must have been something more.

"And?"

"Well, I got the feeling, sir—I got the feeling that the guy who telephoned me—the owner, sir, name of William Paige—I got the feeling he didn't believe him."

Fremont waited. Gavin didn't speak again for a long time.

"I got the feeling, sir—that someone's used the pond this time. Used it on purpose, sir. To get rid of a body. If you know what I mean, sir."

Fremont found it unlikely that this would turn into anything of the sort. He thought that Gavin had probably been reading too many of those crime magazines he had seen lying around his house. He debated how he should answer, vaguely afraid of messing up his new life in Vermont with the kind of squalor he had left behind two years ago. Then he decided it was harmless. Besides, he might as well stay on good terms with the local people.

"Sure, I'll come along with you, Gavin," he finally said.

Gavin thanked him too profusely, and five minutes later the little green Ford with the stickers announcing POLICE pulled up in front of Fremont's house.

It was almost the guiltiest bunch of people Fremont had ever seen. Gavin had had them all sit in the living room, and they had told their communal story—they agreed on the mechanics of everything that had happened, but it was conspicuous—more than conspicuous, it was downright blatantly obvious—that there was much more that they weren't saying, that there was a secret they all held in common and that, further, there were secrets each of them held individually. Gavin had told them that she would probably turn up soon, that he had put out a description; he had even called the divers, he said, just in case she had slipped into the pond somehow and drowned. Yes, he knew the history, but as a matter of form you had to do it anyway, and besides, it wasn't a given that if she *had* drowned, she would necessarily have gone the way of the other one. He and Fremont had walked around the grounds. They had seen the site of the bonfire, inspected the little sugar-house, and studied the edge of the pond, looking for traces, finding none. Then Gavin had cleared a place in Bill's office upstairs and, noticing the closeness of the voices from below, had asked the rest of them to wait outside while he saw them one by one. Fremont merely sat in the background and watched, approvingly, as it happened. Gavin was doing everything pretty much as he would have done, keeping down suspicions and hysteria while nevertheless seeing to it that he got the lowdown from each one of them.

As he interviewed them individually, the true situation emerged, easily, almost with its own force. June's offensiveness,

antipathy; Don's wounds; the flirtation with Surrey; the insulting remarks to almost everyone. Surrey and Celine were clearly nervous, hiding something; when Joe's turn came, they found out what it was. Bill told them of his trip to the sugarhouse to deliver the towels; Don claimed he had been outside, then, looking for June by the fire. Apparently Don had waked them all up that morning, storming into the house at five o'clock in a fit of rage, demanding his wife from whomever's bed she was sharing so that he could immediately start filing for divorce. She had gone too far, he howled, he couldn't stand it any more. He claimed she had never returned to the sugarhouse the night before, that he had been waiting, fuming, in a rage the whole night through, and finally he couldn't stand it any more, he didn't care whom he was waking up, he wanted out, goddammit, now!

When they had seen the last of them, Gavin proposed a stroll. He reassured the group, sitting in disarray on the cold gravel of the driveway or pacing uncomfortably along the bank of the pond, that the divers would be there in about an hour, that there was nothing more to do at the moment, that they should make themselves some coffee and have a bite to eat. He and Fremont left them. They strolled over to the sugarhouse, then up towards the still-warm ashes of the bonfire.

"What do you think?"

"A rare study in hatred," Fremont said slowly. "A dangerous woman, it seems. I think she had a lot on all of them, much more than they've told. She may have made an art of it, a hobby."

"You think someone killed her?"

Fremont nodded.

"They knew about the pond. Someone decided to use it. Probably successfully."

"What do you mean?"

Fremont shrugged.

"Without a body or a witness, it'll be damned hard to pin down anything on anyone. We could unearth a bunch of motives, but . . ."

He shrugged again.

"Unless she suddenly walks out of the woods and makes a fool of us," he added.

"They all agree she isn't the woodsy type," Gavin commented. "Disliked the outdoors. Complained about bugs. No sympathy for trees. Not the type to wander off into the night."

"No," Fremont agreed. "Most certainly not the type."

They walked on silently. They passed the bonfire, continued up the grassy hill.

"I'd say it was the husband," Gavin finally said.

"It usually is," Fremont replied.

"She'd made a fool of him in front of everyone. I'd say she went back to their room, maybe went to sleep. He killed her—strangled, maybe—dumped the body, and prayed it would sink like the last one. After all, he's the only one who says she never went to bed. The others all said she'd gone back to the cabin."

"Though they didn't actually see her enter."

"No."

"The only other possibilities," he said, "are Surrey and Celine. You heard the stairs in that place. No one else could have gotten out without waking the whole place up. And from the time she left them till they went to bed they were all together, except Don. Singing a cappella. You notice, singing that stuff, if somebody's missing suddenly—even if you don't see them go, you miss their voice, their part. And after singing they all walked to the house together—arm in arm, in fact, trying to feel some of the old unity, Bill said. They had a drink, sang one last song together, and went off to bed. Bill, of course—I'd forgotten. Bill could have done it, I suppose, when he went out with the towels. But otherwise . . ."

Fremont nodded his head in agreement.

"Don, Surrey, Celine, Bill. What about the teacher? Out the window, he wouldn't have had to wake up the French couple."

Gavin shook his head.

"I checked the windows," he said. "The screens. Spiderwebs all over them. No one's opened those screens for a good month at least."

"Upstairs?"

"The same."

Fremont was impressed. Gavin must have learned something from those magazines of his. He was a sharp policeman for a small town in Vermont.

They had turned around, were walking back towards the house again, approaching the bonfire from the other side. It looked hopeless to Fremont—and maybe, he thought bitterly, it was just as well. Maybe that poisonous woman was best off buried in the muck of the pond; maybe she really had deserved it; maybe her killer deserved a medal rather than a prison term.

He shook his body, suddenly, trying to get rid of such thoughts. Then he stopped short and stared at something on the ground.

"Oh Jesus," he said quietly.

He had stopped at the top edge of the bonfire. His voice was low, flat, and trembling. Fremont was shaken, and not even trying to hide it.

He was staring down at something that his foot had kicked out from under a last tuft of grass at the edge of the ashes. He was a retired homicide inspector from the city; he had seen a bit of everything—too much, he always said—but what he saw now wrenched him, made him feel sick and wish he hadn't come. What he saw now polluted him, polluted his entire new life in Vermont.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

He looked away.

Gavin's gaze found what had stopped him. He stared at it blankly.

A human hand, slender, white, female, ringed, lay casually beneath the tuft of grass, as though it were offering something to somebody. If he looked carefully, he could make out the vestiges of a charred forearm showing through the ashes. It tapered into nothingness, and it was hard to see any more evidence of a human body in the black remnants of the logs that had burned so hot the night before. Perhaps that was a leg, that an arm—but perhaps they were only the unburned leftovers of thicker chunks of wood.

Fremont forced himself to turn around again, to look into the ashes.

"Not much left," he forced out. "They'll find the teeth in there somewhere. That's about all."

It seemed indecent to just leave the hand there. But worse to touch it, pick it up. Besides, it should be photographed.

"You can call off the divers," Fremont muttered. "Whoever killed her didn't drag her to the water. He dragged her to the fire instead."

"Unbelievable," Gavin said. He was staring, transfixed, at the woman's hand. Finally he turned away.

"I'll get right onto it," he said. "Call Burlington—we need a team. We need . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence. He turned and walked briskly down the hill.

Fremont stood still for several minutes, looking into the ashes. He had forgotten the shock already. He had left behind all his personal concerns, had switched, automatically, into the mode

which had served him so efficiently all those years in New York: the quick, detached, almost machinelike thinking which had nailed so many dangerous customers by beating them to their next move.

There was something funny here. There was something Gavin had said, that he should remember. He couldn't think of what it was.

He started walking, slowly, down the hill. Gavin was out of sight. Fremont passed a stand of trees and could see clearly, now, straight down towards the pond.

And then it came to him: two things at once. He thought them over, found them good. The inkling of a smile relaxed his face.

He didn't know who had done it, yet, but he knew exactly how he would find out.

Gavin came out of the house as Fremont reached the gravel of the driveway.

"Have you told them?"

Gavin shook his head.

Fremont nodded.

"Good. Listen—get me a pad of paper and a pencil. And have that guy, the teacher—"

"Joe."

"That's it. Have Joe come out. And have him bring the song books that they used last night."

Gavin looked at him quizzically.

"Okay," he said hesitantly, and turned back to the house.

Fremont opened the passenger-side door of the Ford and eased himself in. He closed his eyes. It would be over soon, he believed. He hoped. He didn't want it to go on much longer.

Gavin returned with Joe. The two stood at the open door of the car. Fremont handed Joe the pad and pencil and took the songbooks from him. He asked him to write down who had been singing which part, the order of the songs they had sung, and at which song June had left them to walk down to the sugarhouse.

Joe sat down on the little flagstone wall that lined the driveway. He thought for a moment, then wrote. After a couple of minutes he stood up and handed the pad back to Fremont. Fremont looked carefully into his eyes, then thanked him and dismissed him.

Gavin stood awkwardly at the car door, watching as Fremont studied the information on the pad, then began opening the song

books, each in turn. This wasn't what he had pictured at all. It seemed nonsensical, and he wondered if Fremont had lost his savvy, or perhaps his mind. This was not how a New York homicide inspector should be doing things. He should be bending down over that hand, examining it for clutched threads, for blood under the fingernails. He should be looking for footprints, traces in the mud, suggesting items to powder and fingerprint—all the things that Gavin wanted to be doing, but didn't quite know how. Or at least he could interrogate the nervous crowd inside. Instead he was sitting calmly in the car, poring through parts of maudlin oldies, Motown tunes set for barbershop quartets. It didn't make any sense.

Fremont clucked his tongue inside his mouth. He glanced quickly through two more books. Then he closed them all, stacked them together neatly, and placed them by his feet on the car floor.

He looked up at Gavin with a grim smile on his face.

"You've got a gun?" he asked.

Gavin nodded at the glove compartment.

"Put it on and look tough. Look like you're going to hurt someone. I want you to go make an arrest, a harsh arrest, like on TV. Read him his rights—in front of everyone. Make your gun conspicuous. You can do that?"

Gavin nodded. Fremont told him who to book.

"Then bring him to the car, throw him in the back seat. And leave the rest to me."

Although it was the middle of summer, nights were still cold in Hansor. Fremont had built a fire in the wood stove, and the three of them, with the two cats, sat comfortably around it, sipping a tea that Mary brewed from wildflowers she picked herself. Gavin felt honored, almost overwhelmed, to be a guest in Max Fremont's house, to be a co-worker, a confidante.

He sipped his tea; he ran his fingers down the slip cover on the couch; he cleared his throat.

"Start from the beginning," he finally said. "When did you think of it?"

Fremont half smiled. Now that he was back home, with the fire, with the cats, with Mary, it didn't seem so bad after all. It was over now. It had been quick. And all that was important to him was still here, undisturbed.

"There were two problems with what we thought," he said, rocking gently in his chair, his hands clasped loosely in his lap. "When

we found the hand I just assumed, like you, that the murderer had used the fire as we'd thought he'd used the pond: to get rid of the body, with all the clues it would provide to how, and when, and where. But why? Why use the fire, which was risky, when the pond was right there, publicly advertised, tried and tested as a disposal for dead bodies? It didn't make sense.

"That was the first problem. Then the second one occurred to me. There was almost literally nothing left of her. If that hand hadn't happened to fall outside the fire, no one would ever have known there were the remnants of a body there. It was totally incinerated."

He paused, then went on slowly.

"It takes a hell of a fire to do that. It takes a damned inferno. Not a bonfire that's been burning for an hour or two—or three or four. It takes a fire at the height of its powers. Now when was that? That was when they were all singing around it.

"So it *had* to have happened then. All other evidence to the contrary. I saw, then, that the fire wasn't what we had assumed it was—a way to get rid of a body. The fire was itself the murder weapon. Someone must have shoved her into it. And thus the first problem was solved—why the fire and not the lake.

"Ironically, the husband was now in the clear—the only person we had previously suspected. He had left the scene too early. I reconstructed what must have happened. June said good-night—after her fashion—to the singers. They saw her head towards the sugarhouse, and, relieved, took up the song again. But she didn't go down to the sugarhouse—at least not yet. She paused on the other side of the fire, attracted to a fire as we all are, perhaps—or maybe she had some other mischief on her mind. One of the singers strolled around a bit, and was surprised to see her there. She didn't notice him. He saw a golden opportunity. He acted quickly, almost without knowing it, stepped up behind her and shoved her in.

"She might have screamed—for half a second—or she might just have been petrified as she lunged into the flames, unable even to make a noise. In any case it would have been drowned out, both by the roar of the intense bonfire, and by the singing—six people, singing at full voice, all together. After half a second, in such very intense flames, it would all be over anyway. The killer returned to the group, the singing continued.

"That was how it must have happened. I couldn't think of any other way.

"But I was stuck. No one remembered anybody leaving the group. And hunting for motives was no good. If I'm any judge of character, everybody there was hiding reasons to get rid of her."

Fremont stopped talking. The little fire crackled through the open door of the stove; a log collapsed on itself, sending sparks against the screen.

"And then," he continued, "something you had said came back to me."

He nodded appreciatively at Gavin.

"You'd said none of the singers could have slipped away, because, even if no one saw them leave, they'd miss hearing that person's part."

Fremont laughed a depreciating little laugh.

"So it was easy. I had to find a song, soon after June had said goodnight, where one part had a rest—a long rest, long enough to drift away, push a woman in a fire, and then return before the part picked up again.

"I looked through all the songbooks and I found it. A thirty measure rest—in Arnold's part. So it was him. It couldn't have been anybody else."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We had nothing on him, really. But he was an amateur, probably overwhelmed with guilt, unsure of himself. I figured if we played the strong cop role with him, told him we knew all about it, we'd get him. I was right. He was an easy catch."

John Arnold had broken down in the back seat of the car. To Fremont's persistent, unrelenting "whys" he had finally given in, prefacing his answer with a description of the wonders that Alicia accomplished on the children's ward, finishing with a bitter invective against June Smith, who had been intent on ruining it all. Five years ago, June had taken Alicia's MCAT's for her. They had been young, they had been friends—a little makeup, a perm—there hadn't been any trouble. Alicia was a brilliant woman, a brilliant doctor, Arnold claimed. Why should she be punished just because she couldn't score well on those idiotic standardized tests? What did that have to do with anything? he asked furiously. With doctoring? With compassion? With competence?

June Smith scored off the charts on them. Didn't that show you what they were worth?

He stared at them furiously, grinding his teeth together. The skin on his cheeks was as taut as the hide on a drum; it seemed his whole face might just pop, might just explode. And then, instead of popping, the thing melted, convulsed, grew soft and almost flabby as the tears poured from his eyes. He hadn't even meant to do it, he said. It had been like hitting his little brother, much too hard, when he had been a child. She had been standing there. He had hated her. He had pushed her so damned hard . . . And then he wailed. He let out a sickly moan, the crushing realization of a ruined life.

When they spoke to Don Smith, they learned the rest of it. His hopeless infatuation for June Willins. The baby she had delivered, and let fall—the baby that had lived, but with a damaged brain. He had been at the right place at the right time—or so he had thought. She had confided in him—only him—and he had nursed her back to a functioning state of mental health. They had married.

And then . . . the hatred. Hatred of him, for knowing. Hatred of her friends, for having what she would never have again. Most of all, hatred of Alicia. She didn't want Alicia to have what she had given up, what she had, in a sense, earned for her. He had tried to talk her out of it . . .

Gavin sipped his tea—strange stuff. He wasn't exactly sure he liked it all that much.

"You play a good tough cop," Fremont said, smiling at him.

Gavin tried not to blush, but only went a deeper red.

Mary poured more tea. The fire crackled. A cat rolled over and began to purr.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

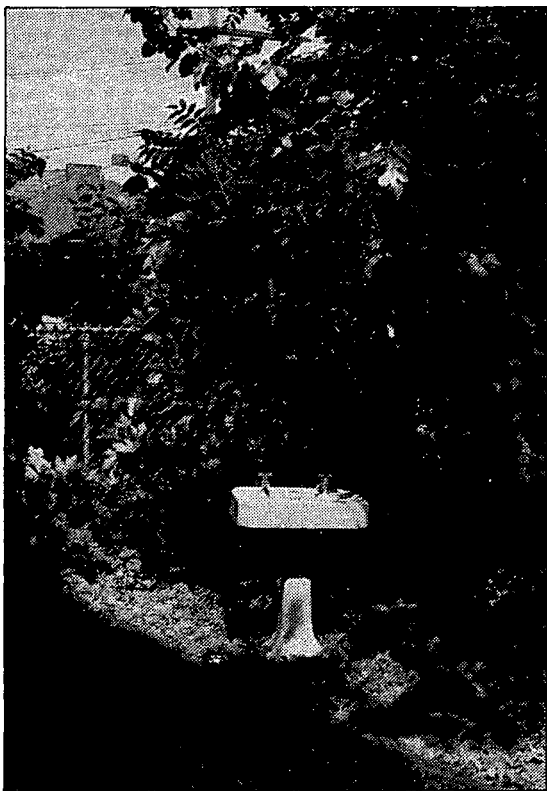


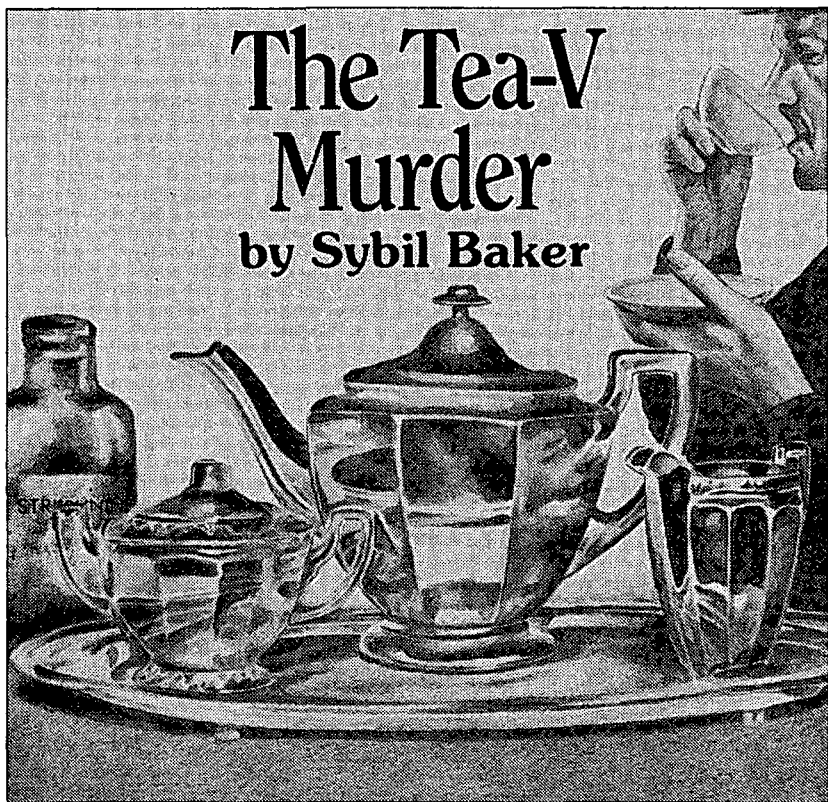
Photo by Karen E. Newton

From a spring bulb? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

The Tea-V Murder

by Sybil Baker



Live TV is what killed Gerald Manley, if you think about it. I mean, it couldn't happen these days, with the shows all taped. But back in 1952, everything was live, even the commercials. Everything black and white. All of it here in New York. Hell, when all the TV shows went to the Coast, there were so many actors beat it outa here that the

island of Manhattan rose half an inch in the water.

That night, the night he was murdered, Manley was starring in *Intrigue*. He was a heluva goodlooking guy for his age, incidentally. Tall and trim—don't gimme that, they wear girdles. He was distinguished, graying at the temples, the silver mustache, the whole bit. Whoever thought he

was the MANN ACTOR in those days? That's what my paper called him in the headlines, during the trial. See, besides being a big-name leading man, he was violating the Mann Act, bringing the teenagers up from Nashville for a callgirl ring. My mother still won't believe that, you know that? She used to watch Gerald Manley every day on *My Gal Sunday*.

So here's the murder scene on *Intrigue*. It was a half-hour show on Tuesdays, ran for years. Sponsored by Tiptop Tea.

Manley's playing a police captain. And during this one scene, this twerp of an office boy gives him a cup of tea. Which happens to be laced with strychnine. Now, strychnine is bitter, okay? And Manley must have known something was wrong, he even blows a line when he takes a sip. But he's a pro, he drinks it down. He can't *not* drink it, right? Especially when the sponsor's Tiptop Tea. That's what you call a diabolical plot. He died with his boots on. Almost. Actually he died about an hour after the show ended, at home.

And guess who played the twerp, the office boy. Bobby Darling played the twerp. Yeah, *the* Bobby Darling. I hear he's up for an Oscar, hey. But at that time he's eighteen,

just a little squirt. The part on *Intrigue* is his first job. He's been in town a year, waiting tables, going to his improvisation class, trying to get an agent to sign him. Face of a choirboy—the one who's just draped the plastic snake over the choir director's baton when the guy takes a cigarette break. That's Bobby Darling in those days. That's his real name, too, by the way. And that was the show that made his name. He comes outa the tank and goes right to the top. Well, maybe it wasn't quite that fast. Yeah, now that I think about it, he had four, five bad weeks there. And I'm talking about *after* he goes to the slammer. In fact, you could say when he lands in the tank is what made his name, more than the show. I covered the story from the beginning. I was at the *Mirror* then, on general assignment.

The day after the TV show, Bobby knows he stole the show, but he doesn't know Manley is dead, see. And ever since he came to Manhattan, all he's wanted is an agent. So the next day, the good news is that two agents come to his house and get him to improvise: "Like what if you bumped off Gerald Manley, son?" At least, he figures that's what they want. So he runs with the situation, he acts up a storm, he pulls out all

the stops at the end with a big confession. And the bad news is they're not theatrical agents, they're FBI agents. Who arrest him.

It was his girlfriend tipped me off to it, and after I hang up, I'm laughing so hard I can hardly type the story. Here's the headline: **YOUNG ACTOR'S BIG BREAK PROVES BIG BUST**. I cover the arraignment. Every paper in town covers the arraignment. **SAYS DIDN'T KILL, JUST ACTED LIKE A JERK**, that's our head.

And Bobby himself, you could always count on a good quote from Bobby Darling. Like right outside the tank, the day he's going in, I ask him, "So you got an agent yet, kiddo?"

He gives that goofy grin. "I got two of 'em—but the trouble is they want to sign me up for life!" Even the guards are laughing.

He's out in a coupla days. The actors are demonstrating, the actors' unions are protesting, the mayor is waffling, Bobby Darling's name is in all the papers all the time—they *had* to let him out—and the biggest agent in town signs him. A real agent. And he thinks his troubles are over. The agent gets him on *Breakfast at Sardi's* and all that stuff, and keeps sending him to read for parts, but nothing happens.

The casting directors look at Bobby's glossies like they're Wanted posters at the post office, and tell him he's "controversial." They're antsy, see, it's the age of blacklisting; they're nervous. If the kid's a killer, who knows, he might even be a pinko. So the bigshot agent goes sour on him, and he's back to making rounds again, and he can't get a part, he can't even get arrested. So to speak. He had the world in the palm of his hand, and it crumbled like a piece of cornbread.

Then one July day Bobby and the girlfriend, Ruthie, decide they gotta clear his name. It was the day the story breaks about Cass Manley not getting anything in the will. That's our Mann Actor's wife: twenty-one, with a Southern drawl. A model. A real dish. She wasn't on the show, but she hung around a lot because of her husband, and she was there when the show aired. And till the will was settled, she was a prime suspect.

So Bobby and Ruthie are having coffee one morning in his ratty basement apartment on East 49th and Third. Twenty-five seventy-nine a month. It's Ruthie's TV, but she lives on East 47th, near Second, in a fifth floor walkup, and the TV set they got at the Salvation Army is as big as a jukebox and

weighs a ton. Ruthie also wants to be in show biz; they're both in the same improv class.

Cass is crying all over the TV, she's oozing charm and dripping tears. Niagara Falls down her cheeks. She says she doesn't care diddley if she don't get any money, money wouldn't bring Jerry back. They all say that, you know that.

Ruthie bends down and puts her coffee mug on the floor. "I thought you said she couldn't act." She's sitting in the one chair in the joint, with her legs folded under her.

Bobby's on the floor, leaning against the bed. "*She* said she couldn't act. I've never seen her act."

"Till now."

He crawls over and turns off the set and stays looking at its dull gray screen: he was on the other side of it less than a month ago; his whole career is so near and yet so far. "I hear she's not working much either, any more," he says, still on all fours. Then he looks at Ruthie and whines like a dog, and she tosses him a peanut from the bag she brought over for breakfast.

He catches it but loses his balance, rolls over, and ends up sitting crosslegged on the floor, cracking the peanut with his teeth. "Gee, thanks, Toothy,

one whole nut," he says in his Donald Duck voice.

She goes into her Goofy bit. "You call me Toothy and you better duck, Duck." She pelts him with a couple more and they sit there munching mournfully. They've known each other since grade school, so their various routines with each other go way back.

He sighs. "I need some more coffee." He goes to the stove, feels the percolator, pours himself half a mug of black coffee, and drinks it in a couple of gulps. "You know what this means?" he says. And now his voice is normal, except normally he doesn't sound as serious. "Guess who's Public Enemy Number One again."

Ruthie's expression doesn't change. Lately, she's getting used to the ups and downs. "I still think Cass did it. Okay, she didn't do it for the loot. Maybe she found out beforehand he was cutting her out of the will, that's why she did it."

Bobby sighs. "She sure didn't like him much." He looks so miserable that Ruthie joins him on the floor and gives him a hug, and he turns and kisses her ardently, and all of a sudden, there they are, stretched out on the floor, after they've promised their folks they wouldn't neck indoors so they'd keep out of harm's way. Ruthie

is grinning. She has one of those smiles, in a narrow face, that seem to show more teeth than most people, so she looks like a small friendly shark half the time. "C'mon, Dar," she says softly.

"Ruthie!" He's shocked, but he's smiling, too, staring at the cross she wears around her neck and hearing his mother warn him to just stay above that cross and he'll be all right. As long as they stay outdoors. He scrambles to his feet. Ruthie's not smiling now; she looks like she wants to bite his ankle. He tells her, "Don't be mad at me, sweetheart. It's not easy being dumb, you know."

She opens her mouth to let him have it, but the phone rings, and it's his bosses at the American Brothers Greek Restaurant. They gave him a month off and a party when he got the TV job, and they even sent him a postcard in the slammer: We bleeve in you, kid. But now, with the thick Greek accent: "It ain't us, Bobby" (us meaning him and his brother), "the lawyers, they say we no can take you back, you know?" and Bobby mumbles that it's okay, and when he hangs up, his eyes are spilling tears, and he can hardly talk.

"The lawyers. For my Greek brothers. I got canned. Whadda

they think, I'll put poison in the coffee?"

"The bastards! It would taste the same if you did!" Ruthie's stomping around, and now they're both bawling, and railing at the FBI and the homicide detectives for loafing on the job, and she says she can lend him some money after her next paycheck from her waitress job at Schrafft's, and he says no, because he can borrow back the money he paid back his folks after the TV show. At last they sit on the unmade bed holding hands, but the only thought in their minds is how they can get Bobby's career back on track by finding the real killer.

Ruthie gazes at him solemnly. "And that means," she says, "first, we gotta get some food in us, and second, bring your notebook."

The lawyer his folks got hold of for the arraignment had suggested that while Bobby's in the tank he write down everything he remembered, relevant or not, about the rehearsals and the actual show. It had helped pass the time, as a matter of fact.

So they go to the greasy spoon, and Bobby gets out his notebook and leans it against his coffee cup, and reads aloud. And among other things, he reads: "The teapot on the show was different from the one in

dress rehearsal. Both something. I can't read my writing. Both silver. But shaped different."

Ruthie frowns. "You don't switch props like that. It might throw the actors."

By the time the kids have finished their breakfast, they've given themselves assignments. Ruthie will try to find out more about Cass in the periodical section at the library, and Bobby will visit Kevin the prop man, way the hell out in Canarsie, it turns out, when he gives him a call.

Kevin McBride has white hair and a pink complexion and smells of Old Spice. They had always gotten along well, as far as it went. No, not always. At rehearsal, it went from: "Hey you, you! What are you doing touching the props there?" to "Sorry I took off your head there, lad, I didn't realize it was your first job," to a long explanation of "the union rules regarding that nobody else touches the props, do you see." He'd made Bobby understand why, too. "Say you're in a scene and your prop is a paddle. It's a canoe scene, and somebody swipes your paddle, see what I mean? You're up that famous creek without your prop!"

The subway takes two hours. Bobby is reading the ads about

life insurance and roaches and Miss Rheingold, and trying to figure out how well Manley and Kevin knew each other. Manley never mixed much with the rest of the cast. Once he'd told Bobby to call him Jerry, but Bobby never did. Except behind his back.

He couldn't figure him out. Didn't Manley know, didn't he care, that Bobby was walking away with their scenes together? The star just seemed bored, delivering his lines, picking up his cues automatically, lifeless as a store dummy. In fact, the only time Bobby ever saw him show any emotion was when the actress playing the secretary walked in one day and told everybody she just signed a petition protesting something or other, and Manley got all excited and sat her down and demanded was she a Commie or what?

"Of course not!" she says.

"Of course not! That's why you don't want to sign any petitions, young lady, you don't know who's behind them!" And he goes on and on about how pinkos are infiltrating the industry and everybody should be on guard and all that stuff. But he mostly just kept to himself. Bobby couldn't remember seeing him talk to Kevin much. Kevin called him by his first name, though. But maybe that

didn't mean anything, since they were about the same age.

After a while he's looking at the Miss Rheingold ad and thinking that Cass is a lot prettier and remembering how she used to flirt with him at rehearsal. One time she tried to get him to go home with her, even. He's jiggling in his seat on the subway and wondering if what he thought would have happened would have happened.

Those long legs, boy. She'd tell him how old fashioned she was, but at the same time her eyes were laughing, like he was a jerk if he believed it. She'd do the same bit, talking about her father. He was a minister, down South. And the day of the show, in Studio 8-H there, right after dress rehearsal, Cass told Bobby, "That's why everybody says I'm so wild, because they think, Oh, a minister's son is a son of a gun. But what they fer-git is a minister's daughtah does what she oughtta." But all the time she's looking at him like they oughtta look around the studio for a hammock or something.

Maybe he shouldn't have told Ruthie about that time Cass put the make on him. It prejudiced her. He didn't want her judgment clouded, he's depended on it all his life.

Kevin's place is a ten-minute walk from the subway stop. A small stucco row house with little rosetrees, a flagpole with a limp Stars and Stripes, and a mint-green patch of flawless new grass in the front yard. Bobby runs his fingers through his hair before he rings the bell, and Kevin answers with a glass of beer in his hand and the smile to go with it. He leads the way to the immaculate kitchen to get Bobby a beer, and out the back door, and they sit at the picnic table under a large trellised bower of honeysuckle that doesn't quite drown out the Old Spice.

Kevin wants to know was the going to jail a publicity stunt, or what? And Bobby has to explain his situation, and finally Kevin looks at him with his pink face all crinkled around the eyes, "You must be worried to death, son."

And Bobby nods, his eyes moist, and for a while, they talk about Gerald Manley. To Bobby's surprise, Kevin says, "Well, let's face it, he wasn't any good." His mouth turns down at the corners, and he shakes his head. "He used to be."

Bobby hesitates. "Yeah, he was a little stiff, I agree." Then he realizes this is not the greatest choice of words under the circumstances.

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to go back to the rambling
country house...

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"Oh, I'm not talking about his acting," says Kevin, "there's more to life than acting, lad." He says that Gerald Manley started going downhill some years ago. "And then he fell into the fleshpots."

"Fleshpots."

"Women."

"Oh, women," Bobby says, yeah, he'd heard rumors about that.

Kevin's face becomes stern. "Have you now."

"Well, yeah. I mean they're probably not true."

Kevin sits back in his chair and looks at him, and narrows his eyes, and Bobby gets the feeling the prop man is gonna give him a piece of his mind for gossiping about the star, and then Kevin looks into the distance and mumbles, "Well, it needn't concern you, anyone can see that you're a good lad," and Bobby relaxes again.

Kevin shifts in his chair. "So how do we get you off the hook and find the murderer?"

Now they can get down to business, and Bobby says he wants to know exactly how Kevin sets up for the commercial.

"Well, as I told the FBI, the routine is exactly the same, every show."

"So the FBI talked to you?"

"Sure. Don't they tell you nothin' then?" And he clicks his

tongue as Bobby shakes his head. Before the commercial, Kevin says, the routine was to check the props on the prop table by the kitchen set, where the two actresses playing two housewives do their stuff.

Kevin unfolds his fingers, one by one, as he lists tablecloth, napkins, spoons, teapot, sugar pot, cream pitcher, all full, teacups and saucers, plate with "preseeded lemon slices, no seeds, see, I squeeze 'em out myself, makes it nicer for the ladies." He was also in charge of spraying the teapot, camera-side, for glare.

"It's real tea, right?"

"It's the product, yes. But after the show, like I told the FBI fellers, I pour it down the drain and wash the pot. Same with the other teapot, the one that got you in trouble."

"But Kevin, the one in the tea scene, on the show, the teapot was different from the one in dress rehearsal."

"Oh no, lad, you got that wrong. That's not what we do."

"Kevin, it was!"

"No, no, no, no. I'd like to help you, you know that, but son, this is my job, I check the props before every scene."

"But if somebody switched them—"

"—I would've known!"

There's a long silence. Bobby rubs a little circle in the con-

densation on his beer bottle. The two actresses doing the housewives could have done the commercial. Then afterward, someone could have put the strychnine in that teapot while Kevin was setting up for the opening scene of the drama, and then switched the teapots before the tea scene—after all, the prop man couldn't be everywhere at once. But he senses that Kevin, for all his kindness, will never go along with this theory. Kevin doesn't want his props touched; even in his mind, he has a ten-foot wall around them. "Lemme just ask you one more thing. Was anybody near the set for the commercial, when it was shot?"

Kevin shakes his head decisively. "Just Roy Grant. But he's always there when we do the commercial. That's his job, after all." Roy Grant was on the Tiptop account for his ad agency. "And another thing. I know what you're thinking, lad, but if somebody poisoned *that* pot—you had a cup from it yourself, didn't you? You did in rehearsal—"

Bobby groans and holds his head like it's shaking to pieces, along with his theory. He blushes furiously. "And lived to tell the tale," he mumbles. "Yeah, I did. How could I forget that? What a jerk!"

"No, no, no, no." Kevin seems equally upset. "Don't take on now, you've a grand career ahead of you when this blows over."

The prop man is still frowning as the two stand at the front door. "I wish I could've helped you more, and that's a fact."

"You have helped, Kevin, thank you. I could've chased that wild goose to Canada and back."

"No, no, no, no." He pats Bobby's shoulder and gazes out at his neat little lawn. His expression is so sad that Bobby suddenly remembers that the prop man's son, his only child, was killed in World War I. But maybe Kevin only saw a weed or something, because he says, "Speaking of Roy, there's a man who don't know his lawns, I'll tell you that."

"Well, thanks again."

"There's one thing, though," Kevin says. He looks around, lowers his voice, and speaks with his lips barely moving. "I think Roy Grant has the hots for that model Jerry married. But I wouldn't want it to get around, that it come from me."

Bobby blinks. "Well, uh, I can't see *her*, though, going for him."

"Oh? That's what you think." The prop man looks kind of huffy. "You'd be surprised what you hear at the prop table. I

think people forget you're not a plate yourself."

In deep thought, Bobby walks back to the subway. Roy Grant? That jerk? Roy appeared on the scene on Monday, the last day at the rehearsal studio, and saw a run-through. The ad executive hadn't paid much attention to the show but watched the commercial like a hawk, and gave one of the actresses playing one of the housewives a bad time. All that fuss over one word.

The actress takes a sip of tea. "Oh, this is Tiptop," she says.

"Sweetheart, I think the 'oh' weakens it," says Roy. "Just: This is Tiptop, okay?"

"Oh, did I say oh?"

He nods. "From the top." Then she'd say, "Oh, this is Tiptop," again. Then she'd say, "Oh dear," and they'd do it over.

Roy tried to pal around with the cast, but didn't seem to know how. Kept talking about his lawn—he lived in Connecticut—when none of them had lawns. And then, when they moved to Studio 8-H the next day, for the dress rehearsal and show, the dress rehearsal was lousy and Roy kept babbling afterwards, "Tiptop, everybody," till they thought he was a moron.

Bobby never noticed him and Cass hanging around together.

What would she see in him? Well, he was goodlooking. Tall, intense, ambitious. Bobby just can't picture them doing it. On second thought, that doesn't mean anything. You can't picture anybody doing it. Not really. Not really doing it.

But riding back on the subway, as he gets used to the idea, it begins to make sense, and he starts to cheer up. Roy Grant has a lot of energy, a lot of self-confidence. Wavy black hair, big grin, strong chin, strong handshake. And he's young. And Cass's husband is fooling around with fleshpots and ignoring her. Suddenly he realizes that all the little tender feelings he had for Cass on the way out have vanished, and he exults in his newfound knowledge: Cass and Roy Grant are a thing. Sure. Sure! And, gazing at the ads for Study at Home and Pond's cream and mouse poison, Bobby auditions various scenarios.

He pictures Cass in a penthouse, pleading with Gerald Manley for a divorce, and Manley walking stiffly to the bar, pouring a scotch, swiveling to answer. "Never." He pictures Cass lounging around the studio, pictures her kissing Roy Grant behind the office set, pictures her slyly reaching into her handbag and taking out a packet of white powder. The ho-

micide detective on his case, Bill Roos, had told him strychnine was white. Then he visualizes Cass on TV that morning, with the tears running down her face, mourning her husband.

This brings him up short. Nah, she didn't do it. But wait. Even if the tears were real, so what? Boy, he'd cry too if he'd expected a million dollars and got zip. He put himself in her shoes. Okay. You're thinking of the dough, and you're mad as hell, so you cry, and since you're talking about your husband at the time, guess what, people out front put two separate things together and say, "Look how she loved her husband; she didn't do it." That's acting.

He races up the five flights of Ruthie's building and she's waiting at the door: she knows his gallop.

He tells what he learned, lapping up the look on Ruthie's face.

And the authenticity of Cass's tears becomes a moot point when Ruthie recounts what she found out at the Astor Pharmacy, where they sell theatrical makeup. She'd gone to the periodical section at the Main Library and hadn't found out anything they didn't know. Came from Nashville, father a minister, maiden name Rup-

per. "Can't act worth a darn," Cass said in a *Vanity Fair* interview, "so that's why I went into modeling." And afterward, standing by one of the stone lions outside, Ruthie sees some pigeon droppings under the lion's eye, and thinks of Cass's performance that morning.

The old guy behind the counter at the Astor probably played the Borscht Belt in his youth. "So what can I do you for, sweethawt?"

Ruthie said she had a friend who just got a part in which she has to end a scene crying. "Crying, crying, like for five minutes."

"So what's the situation? Your boyfriend left you, the meshuggena, a beautiful little doll like you?"

Ruthie was horrified. "It's not *me*! I'm a method actress. But my friend isn't."

"Whatever."

"The situation is that her father did her wrong or something, I don't know. But is there something, I mean I think I've heard of something—"

"Makes you cry?" The old guy laughed, reached in a drawer behind the counter, put something in each palm, raised his hands to his eyes, and sobbed. "Oh my God, he loves another?" Tears were streaming down his face. "That's the glycerine capsules," he said,

"you squish 'em on your cheeks. Comes in bottles, tube, or capsules. I recommend the capsule, ninety-eight cents. That's why I'm crying. I used to get two bucks for 'em."

Bobby is fascinated. He agrees, Cass probably got herself a million-dollar performance for ninety-eight cents. Naturally, Ruthie had bought a small flat box of the glycerine capsules. Naturally, he and Ruthie have to try them. They stagger around crying, happy as larks that a love triangle has emerged as a solid motive for Cass to murder Manley.

"You think I should tell my detective?" Bobby asks grinning and weeping. That's Bill Roos in Homicide, like I said, but Bobby hasn't talked to him lately.

"You say my detective like other people say my dentist!" Ruthie says, laughing and crying. "Let's make sure it's true first." They plan their next move. Bobby will give Cass a call, maybe she'll ask him up again.

"But be careful, Dar, she's a man-killer."

"Ruthie! You think I'd let her seduce me?"

"That's not what I'm talking about, idiot. I mean man-killer, she's already killed one man. Don't eat anything. Don't drink anything there. If she thinks

you're onto something, she might try to knock you off, too."

"Don't worry. Good point." He nods, and wipes his eyes.

Reporters are hanging around the entrance of the Park Avenue apartment building where the Manleys live. Make that singular. Bobby walks past it on the other side of the street, then crosses at the corner and goes into the building next door. There are two doormen standing there, one tall and one short. He murmurs Cass's name to the tall doorman and is ushered through a magnificent lobby, out the back door, past the trashcans—even the trashcans are clean—to the back entrance of Cass's building. The doorman lets him in with a key and directs him to the elevators.

As a matter of fact, the Manley apartment isn't a penthouse. Sixth floor. He hesitates at the door. It's five past three o'clock. He's five minutes late, and nervous as hell. He strokes the collar of his shirt, concentrates on its texture, breathing evenly. It's a relaxation exercise he learned in his improvisation class. He rings the bell. Cass is wearing jeans and a faded blue shirt. She's barefoot. Her black hair is shining, her eyes are shining, her smile

would reach the balcony. "Have any trouble gettin' in?"

"No, like clockwork."

She leads him down a long hall into the living room. "Should be, I give 'em enough. Kin I git you a drink?"

Bobby thinks fast. "No, thanks, Cass, I usually don't drink before five or so."

"Me either." She flops on a leather sofa, and he takes an easy chair covered in some sort of tapestry. "How you been, darlin'? I bet you're still gettin' fan mail."

She's looking at him wistfully. "I never seen so much talent packed in one little parcel as you, I mean it."

Bobby gives a modest laugh, and can't think what to say. "So was that a surprise, about the will?"

She scowls. "How kin you all say that! That's what the cops want to think, too. And that's so dumb, that is so dumb, I knew all about that, and Jerry knew I didn't leave *him* nothin', neither." She crosses her arms in exasperation. "I keep tellin' them, anybody who knew Jerry knew what a cheapskate he was. Shoot! Why, that man was such a cheapskate, you have no idea. He'd win a dollar and forty-five cents off me in gin rummy? He'd hound me for days till I give him that dollar forty-five."

Bobby didn't mean to set her off, she might throw him out. "Why, that's outrageous!" he says in his Donald Duck voice. That always made Cass laugh at rehearsal.

And she laughs now. "I mean it! Thank God I got these pair of money makers." She lies on her back, with her hair flowing over the side of the sofa and her legs straight in the air. Wiggling her toes. "I get sixty bucks an hour, just for the legs."

"I know, you told me that at rehearsal once. That's neat."

"Yup." Then she swings her legs onto the floor again. "Hey, I'll fetch us some lemonade. Made it myself." And she bounces up and leaves the room, but she's still talking, as Bobby looks around. This is his chance to find a clue. Lush. Posh. Neat as a pin. No address book or anything, no clue in sight. "See, the servants are off today," she calls out from beyond an open door. "I got six of 'em. I ain't gonna change my life, just 'cause I'm pore now. That rascal, where's the sugar." Bobby wonders if she means her husband or one of the servants. "Oh, here it is. I even got a job tomorrow, first one I've accepted since the, uh, the show."

And now she's back, carrying two tall glasses of lemonade and giving him one.

"Thanks." Unconsciously, he almost takes a sip, but remembers not to, and puts the glass on the little mahogany table next to his chair.

Cass returns to the sofa. "My daddy used to give me such a hard time over having six servants. He's a minister, back home." Bobby doesn't want to say "I know" again, so he doesn't say anything. She goes on, "But I wanted six, see, cuz I got six brothers and sisters, so I wanted the same number."

"Huh." The lemonade looks good. He's really thirsty. "You got a bottle of soda, Cass? Like in a bottle?"

"Sure don't."

"Well, never mind."

There's a pause. She's gazing at him with her head on one side. "Tell me somethin', darlin'. You ain't never had sex, have you?"

Bobby looks at her like she's insulted his mother. "Sure I have, you kidding? Listen, I've had it every which way you can think of." He paused. "Except with a girl." She laughs. Then he does. Then they're laughing together, and he begins to relax. "So, Cass, uh, I bet you're wondering why I wanted to see you."

She shakes her head. She seems in a good mood again. "I know why you wanted to see me. Same reason I wanted to

see you." She's looking at him so hard, with her bright soft eyes, that he feels a blush coming on. She rises slowly from the sofa and approaches him slowly, but when she gets to the little table, she suddenly cries out in pain, and reaches down the sides of her legs.

"Ooo, ooo, I got a cramp in my feet!" she says. "Come stand on 'em, stand on my feet!"

Bobby gets up, moves a little closer to her, frowning, with his mouth also shaped in an oo, oo, and tentatively puts a foot out toward hers.

"Not in your shoes! Oooh, owwww!"

Quickly, humbly, Bobby takes his shoes off.

"Oww, ooo, come stand on 'em, put your feet on 'em. Oooo!"

So now he's standing on her feet, and they're nose to nose. Or nose to chin, anyway, Cass is a good bit taller. And she's moaning, like in ecstasy. "Oh, oh, oh my Lord. Oh. That's better. Don't move."

"Is it better?"

"You know, I knew a healer back home. Like you. You got healin' eyes."

"Is it better now?"

"Uh-huh. Trouble is, ever notice how solving one problem gives you another problem?"

"Yeah." He hops off her feet and steps back.

Cass laughs. "You act like I give you a hot foot."

"Not only the foot." She laughs again. "You don't understand, Cass, I'm, I'm very attracted to you."

"Nooohh," she says, like she can't believe it, her eyes laughing. She pauses. "Well, darlin', I took to you the moment I laid eyes on you."

"I love it when you call me darling," he says.

"Thass your last name!"

"I know." His brains have melted. He doesn't care.

She comes close to him. He steps back, grabs the lemonade on the little table and drinks deeply. Then, realizing what he's done, he cries out and drops the glass, grabs for it, and it spills all over his shirt, and he watches the glass bounce on the carpet.

Cass laughs. "Now look what you done!"

"Oh my God." Bobby sits down again and holds his head in his hands.

She kneels in front of him, mopping at his shirt with her shirt. "You shore know how to make a girl take your shirt off."

And she takes his shirt off, while Bobby sits in a tingling agony of desire and apprehension. Then she starts licking his chest. "Needs more sugar," she says. "Maybe I didn't stir yours."

"Don't! Stop!"

"I ain't about to."

Bobby finally manages to cover his bare, sticky chest with his hands and slide back in the chair and circle around her and stand up.

She gets to her feet, too. "Darlin'," she says. "Darlin' Bobby Darlin'." She pauses. "Just answer me one thing. Do you love me?"

"No!"

"Well, so that's all right then." She walks toward a door at the corner of the room and opens it and turns around. "C'mon."

He can't speak.

"C'mon!"

He shakes his head.

"How can you be an actor if you don't know nothin' about life?"

She turns her back on him and walks out the door. And after a moment, he follows her.

Well, afterwards, there they are, both naked in her bed like they've known each other all their lives. "See, when you and your girlfriend git married, I'll send you a present, and she'll write and say, 'Thank you for the lovely present,' and I'll say to myself, 'Boy, you don't know what a lovely present I give you.'" She smooths his hair, and traces the lines of his right eyebrow. Bobby kisses her

cheek. She goes on, "What's she like? You love her?"

He plays with her hair. "We grew up together. Since third grade. But we didn't start going together till we were juniors in high school. There was this kid lived under a bridge. His mother was in a mental institution? Ruthie used to secretly take him food every day. I followed her once, that's how I found out." He pauses. "Cass, can we stop talking about her, please?"

"Aww, you *are* worried. Here now, it's different for boys, she knows that. Why, my daddy fixed up my brothers hisself, with some local gals at the whoorhouse."

"He did? The minister?"

Cass gives him a sidelong glance and reaches into the drawer of the bedside table on her side, and throws a snapshot onto his chest. "Here's my dad, the Reverend Rupper."

In astonishment, Bobby looks at the photo of an unpainted wooden shack with a porch that leans one way and an old sofa with a broken foot tilting the other way. Three ragged children are sitting on the sloping sofa and staring straight ahead; two younger ones are clinging to a hollow-eyed woman. A little girl in a long tattered dress is standing next to the sofa. In the fore-

ground is a gnarled, bleary, be-whiskered old guy clutching a bottle.

"Did he take a vow of poverty?"

She laughs. "He ain't no minister. The one with the liquor, that's him."

"Oh." He manages to disguise his surprise and points to the little girl. "And this is you."

"Nope, that's Jessie Kay, my li'l sister. I was takin' the picture."

He's overcome with compassion and admiration: how hard Cass must have struggled to get to this Park Avenue apartment! She frowns, and he looks at her tenderly. "What?"

"Jerry was tryin' to get Jessie Kay to come to New York and be a call girl. You know what that is?"

He's dumbfounded. "Yes."

"But she don't have any brains, nor my looks neither, to get out of it." She pauses. "Which I finally convinced her."

He's still looking at the picture, like he can't get enough of it.

Cass gives a yelp. She had turned the clock around to see its face. "Shoot! I gotta get outa here! I'll be late for my meeting!" And she heads for the closet, pawing through clothes and mumbling about a million-dollar client. Over her shoul-

der, she tells him, "You better scoot, honey, makes me nervous to have anybody watch me dress."

He goes home and lies down. He feels as happy as he's ever been in his life. Also as guilty. So he goes to sleep. He wakes up when the phone rings, and it wipes all the happiness out of him like a wiper on a windshield. It's probably Ruthie. Calling from work, the pay phone at Schrafft's, outside the kitchen. At last he answers it.

"Dar! I was about to hang up. Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah."

"So can you pick me up after work and tell me all about it? Is it true about Roy Grant?"

He's stunned. He realizes for the first time that he never even asked about Roy Grant. "Well, um, um, well, for one thing, her father isn't a minister, and um, listen, I'm beat, Ruthie. How 'bout if I pick you up for breakfast, okay?"

The next morning, he slowly climbs the stairs at Ruthie's place. He hasn't slept that well, trying to reason it out as if he's a third party: if Cass did it with him, that meant she wasn't doing it with Roy Grant. No, that wouldn't necessarily follow. Maybe that client she was supposed to meet *was* Roy Grant, maybe she was meeting him for

dinner. In fact, maybe Bobby himself was just an appetizer. But every time he tried to think this way, he'd just keep recalling how luscious it was, and he'd roll around, hugging himself and moaning and whispering Cass's name. And every time he thought of Gerald Manley luring that pretty little girl in the tattered dress into a call girl ring, he felt like he wanted to do it with her, too, and he hated himself, he loathed himself, and called on God to forgive him; just forgive him this once, and he'd never do it again. With anybody, the rest of his life.

He gives two knocks at Ruthie's door, and his own heart answers, thud, thud, and she comes to the door, and she looks just the same as ever. "So how'd it go? I can't wait! Is it true about Cass and Roy Grant?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Ruthie's pad is a cold-water flat, which really means hot water but no heat. Down one wall, the fridge, the sink, the stove, and the bathtub, which has a cover on it so you can use it as a countertop. Water closet in the corner. The rent is seventeen forty-three a month. Now it's hot as blazes, right under the roof and only two windows at one end: no cross-ventilation, in other words. Through an arch is the next room, if you

can call it a next room, with the single bed and dresser. There's a curtain you can pull across for privacy.

Bobby wanders over to the stove and takes the top of the percolator off and looks in.

"It's cold. I figured we'd go out—"

"Yours is better." He lights the stove. "We had her wrong, Cass," he says.

Ruthie's jaw drops. "What did you call me?"

"We had Cass wrong is what I said. She didn't do it. She was completely honest. She came from a real poor family in the South, and Gerald Manley was trying to get her sister up here to be a call girl."

Ruthie pauses. "But that's the motive then?"

Darling shakes his head.

"She sure turned you around." Ruthie walks thoughtfully over to the stove and turns off the gas and studies his face. "Did she flirt with you again?"

"No. Well, yeah."

"So. So she put the make on you, and you're so flattered that you believe everything she said. I'm surprised you didn't go to bed with her."

Bobby can't think of anything to say. He moves over to the cabinet above the bathtub, where the cups are, and opens the door.

"You did. You did. Did you?"

Her voice is soft.

"Ruthie—"

She stares at him, then doubles over as if struck in the stomach, moaning, sobbing, the tears coming in torrents.

"Ruthie, don't, look, guys are different." When he approaches her, she pushes him away and runs toward the bedroom, crying and hitting the end of the bed. "With *her*? When I've wanted you so much, and you wouldn't?"

"Ruthie, you're so, don't be so, you're so wholehearted, Ruthie, you don't understand!"

She turns around, and her eyes are blazing with hate. "Get out of here! Get out of here! We're through!"

"Because I'm honest? Because, with you, I promised my parents about us? Because I keep my promises?" His voice suddenly becomes matter-of-fact. "Ruthie, are we improvising?"

She stamps her foot. "Get out of here! No, we're not improvising! Are you crazy?"

He looks worried. "It's a possibility."

Now she's circling him, crouching like a prizefighter, hands fisted, like she's gonna beat him up, talking all the while. "Yes, I am wholehearted, you shallow jerk, you flit, with all your voices,

and—you're as shallow as a—I hope you get VD! I hope you get convicted! You weasel, you were always this way!"

"Ruthie, I've never seen you like this!"

"You were always like this!" She looks almost triumphant. "Remember when you told Mr. Atkins on Herbie Sorenson?" Now she's standing up straight again, her hands on her hips.

"Herbie Sorenson? In fifth grade? He *did* steal the chalk! Besides, he was beating up the little kids."

Her hands drop to her sides. "I just want you to go," she says. "I don't want to see you again, I don't want to hear from you again. And I don't want to see your parents, either."

So he turns and leaves, and slams the door behind him, and pounds down the stairs.

At first, he's through with her, too. But after a while, he sees it from her viewpoint: maybe he himself would have been just as vindictive, if the tables were turned. He keeps calling up, apologizing, pleading, telling her that she's his other half, for Pete's sake. She won't talk to him. And in their improv class, she won't look at him.

One day, he calls Cass, also. And Cass says, "Who?" and when he repeats his name, she

laughs. "Oh Lord, give 'em an inch and they want the whole damn front yard." She's teasing him again; he can picture her face. "Listen, honey, I am real busy right now, but I'll give you a ring one of these days, you hear? And thank you for a very nice time the other day, you take care now, bye-bye now." Click. She's hung up, and he stares at the phone. It takes him a minute to realize he's been given the old heave-ho, smothered in Southern syrup. He wishes he hadn't called. He imitates her sarcastically: "Bah-bah naow." He sits motionless for a long time.

Okay, so he has to do it all himself. All by himself. The most important thing is to determine the nature of the ad executive's connection with Cass. That's probably why she's so busy these days, in fact. Sure! They had to sneak around while Manley was alive, but now Roy has the field all to himself. Heck, that's the oldest motive in the world for murder. Maybe they did it together. Or maybe Roy did it alone. Maybe he was a gentleman about it, and didn't even tell her. But then he rolls his eyes, and shrugs and snorts. He doesn't even know if they're going together!

Well, so he'll just have to trail him till he finds out.

The first time, Bobby waits outside the ad agency around six P.M., and Roy comes out with some guy in a suit just like Roy's, and they hail a taxi to Carnegie Hall, and Bobby beats their time in the subway, and he watches them go in, and stands outside, and hears the music from inside, and feels like a real outsider.

At noon the next day, he's waiting across the street from the ad agency. He waits till two; Roy never shows. Bobby curses him for eating lunch at his desk: that figures, the ambitious jerk. A few hours later, Bobby puts on his only suit and meticulously glues on a little mustache. Roy comes out at six, with another lookalike, a little older, and Bobby trails them into Grand Central and into the Oyster Bar. The two of them are sitting at the bar, and Bobby is standing near enough to hear them discuss one of the makeup men, putting him down, and Roy suddenly excuses himself to his companion, and comes over to Bobby and says, very pleasantly, "Hullo, Bobby. I'd advise you to stop trailing me, it's getting on my nerves." And Bobby just stands there like a dummy, blushing. It's like he's empty these days, and the quick comebacks have all gone.

A couple of days later, he goes to the Salvation Army and gets paint-spattered overalls and a white paint-spattered hat with "Benjamin Moore" lettered on it. People never looked at workmen. At noon again, he's waiting across the street from the ad agency.

He waits until half past one, and gives up and leaves, but glances back, and there's Roy Grant, coming out alone and heading north. Bobby pulls his cap down, skews his mouth sideways, to look different, and ambles along on the other side of the street, and loses him, and crosses the street and then sees him again, ahead of him, turning into a ritzy restaurant. He pauses outside; reads the menu in the window, trying to scan the crowd of lunchers on the other side of the glass.

Suddenly Roy charges out the door, shouting, "What do you want, you little maniac?"

Passersby stop and stare. "I just wanta ask you something," Bobby mumbles.

"So give me a call, get off my back, or you'll be back in the tank, Bobby, I'm warning you!"

"Give da kid his money, whatsa mattuh witcha!" shouts an old lady.

They both goggle at the lady. Bobby wakes up first. "At least lemme do a second coat."

Then Roy comes to life again, shoots his arm out pointing, beating time like a symphony conductor. "I'll give you a second coat—with stripes on it." He marches back into the restaurant, and Bobby could bet his life that Cass is inside, and so he goes right after him, but the maitre d' stops him cold, talking about a dress code.

"I just want to match a color, pal," Bobby wheedles.

"Beat it, buddy, or I call the cops."

Just then, a drunk sitting at the bar slowly rotates and throws up, and people draw back from him.

Bobby gestures at the mess on the floor. "Okay, got it, a little more green," he says.

Nobody laughs. Bobby beats it, and walks slowly back to his apartment.

Maybe he didn't say the line loud enough. Maybe his timing was off. Maybe it was just in bad taste. Maybe he's lost it, his talent. The last time he improvised in class with Janice, his scene partner, he was criticized for trying to play for the result, trying to play for the laughs, instead of just letting it happen. Next time he'll let it happen, he thinks, he'll just sit there and go boo hoo hoo.

That night he wanders around his apartment and goes to the phone to call Ruthie, and

thinks what's the use? Then he picks up that morning's *Daily News* and puts it down again and picks it up again, and leafs through it, and halfway through, sees the name Kevin McBride under a letter to the editor, and reads intently. It says: "When is our so-called citizenry, not to mention the well-intentioned but naive actors and actresses who have always given us so much pleasure, going to wake up to the Red menace of Commies and other assorted Pinkos amongst them? Every day brings us closer to the brink." And under the name Kevin McBride was a dash and the word Canarsie. Bobby remains as still as a statue. It must be the same McBride, the prop man. And he recalls Gerald Manley's quizzing of the actress who played the secretary on the show, scolding her for signing a petition. So the star and the prop man both supported blacklisting, probably. But what bearing would that have on the murder?

He gets up as slowly as an old man and goes to the door, and opens it and goes out, and slowly, quietly, locks it behind him, and walks down the block, head bent and arms folded, like his chest hurts.

Kevin, soothing and pink, spouting off about Commies?

Manley had gone bad, fallen into the fleshpots, Kevin had said. Was that a motive? Could kind little Kevin the prop man commit murder? "Yes," he says aloud, the way you answer somebody when you don't care, one way or the other. Just goes to show how you don't know anybody. Sure, maybe everybody's capable of murder. Cass? Sure. After they'd made love, he'd thought with awe that now he understood why it said in the Bible that people "knew" each other after they'd made love. But now he knows he doesn't know her at all.

He doesn't feel that way about Ruthie, though. He can picture her face, full of hate, and just wish he was with her. But what he can't figure out is why she won't at least be friends. How can you just throw more than half your life away like that? He doesn't have a sister, that's the problem. He doesn't understand women.

He walks for block after block across town, heading north and then west. Occasionally, he sees people in their apartments having a late-night snack, or pauses to watch people going into a restaurant or coming out of it. And every time he sees a couple together, with linked arms or holding hands, it's like a stab in his heart.

At least he knows now that Roy has the capability of committing murder: he's sharper and meaner than he thought. But how was it done? Manley and he himself, playing the twerp in that scene, both drank the same tea from the same teapot. And only Manley died.

Above the West Side Highway, he stares down at the rapid traffic and thinks, how can people trust each other enough to drive? When he closes his eyes, he can hear horrible screeching, squealing, crash noises, and so he opens his eyes again, but finds that now it's too scary to watch, and quickly walks east again, and heads up Amsterdam, and sees somebody going through a trashcan. How can I feed them? What can I do? And he visualizes Ruthie in the woods, carrying a full paper bag toward the bridge. Then, on Broadway, he sees a young couple kissing passionately and feeling each other's bottoms, and it seems as strange to him now as if these human beings were Martians in some incomprehensible ritual: what *is* sex, anyway?

And as time goes by, he feels that he understands less and less, and is unsure about everything he decided before. He passes an armory and hears a National Guard unit drilling inside and thinks, how can peo-

ple kill each other? How *can* one person murder another person? How can *anybody* do it? By the time he reaches Central Park, strange scenes are going through his mind. He lies down and stares at the sky: ridged banks of light gray clouds, almost motionless. When he closes his eyes, he sees a Hall-mark-card meadow of grass and daisies, and he's gleefully springing after Cass, who changes into Ruthie. He moans aloud and turns his head from side to side on the rough grass. Finally he rises and brushes the grass off his jeans and goes out of the park toward the subway. He's so full of despair that he's beyond tears.

A sailor asks him, "Hey, bud, which way's uptown?"

"I don't know," Bobby says, shaking his head helplessly. And a moment later, a ragged woman emphatically signals him to stop. "*Perdón, señor, dónde se puede encontrar una confitería?*"

Bobby lifts his shoulders, lifts his arms at both sides. "I don't understand," he says in anguish.

Maybe that night stretched his mind or something. Something happened. He saw the big picture, or something.

The next morning he doesn't wake up till around ten, since he was out so late. So he's lying

in bed, staring at the ceiling, picturing the silver teapot from the commercial set—which was inexplicably substituted for the silver teapot in the drama—and his vision expands to the cream pitcher and the sugar bowl on the same tray, and he sits bolt upright in bed. Strychnine is a crystalline white powder, Detective Roos had told him. Nobody would notice a layer of it on top of the sugar. In the scene, Manley put two teaspoons of sugar in his tea. And Bobby didn't put any, because he likes his tea black as well as his coffee. Talk about sugar not being healthy! He could have died from it himself! What if he'd just taken some sugar himself, on the spur of the moment?

Now his mind is racing here and there, from an image of Ruthie weeping by his graveside to the TV studio and back again—boy, then she'd be sorry! And he forces himself to calm down and focus on the small kitchen set, where the commercial was shot. Only Kevin and Roy nearby. Not Cass. But Cass could have gotten Roy to do it, if they were lovers.

He thinks for a solid half hour, checks his watch, and throws on some clothes. He's supposed to rehearse at Janice's at eleven, they're impro-

vising on a Clifford Odets scene.

So he's at her house, improvising, but he's so excited and jumpy he can't keep his mind on it, and finally Janice says they're getting nowhere, and wants to know, "so *now* what's the matter?" She's a pudgy girl with big brown eyes.

Speaking with great intensity, Bobby explains how he's trying to trail this guy to find out if he's going with Cass Manley, and he never catches them together, and the guy keeps recognizing him. So Janice looks at him with her big, kind eyes, and first she says, "First of all, Cass Manley's rehearsing for an *Intrigue* show, don't you read your *Variety*? So naturally she'd be there, not with him."

"No kidding!" Bobby exclaims. "What's the matter with me, I keep chasing the woods so hard, I lose the trees." And then Janice suggests *she* trail the guy, maybe she can catch him with Cass, what does he look like?

Bobby is so touched he wants to throw his arms around her. "No, I can't let you do that, Jan. These people are dangerous, they might bump you off." Then he snaps his fingers. And a little while later, he's leaving Janice's carrying a hat box, with a blonde wig inside it that

she's lent him. And on the way home, he conceives of an additional scheme: maybe the wig could help him get access to Ruthie, too. And maybe if he can get her to laughing, she'll forget her beef with him.

The next day, Friday, he stops on the last flight of stairs up to Ruthie's, takes out the wig and puts it on. It's a page-boy, with bangs. Then he trots up the rest of the way and knocks. She answers the door and stares at him. Her face is cold, distant, without a flicker of a smile. "So where did you get the wig?"

"From Janice. See, every time I trail Roy Grant, I'm always dressed wrong. As a girl, I can get in anywhere and not be recognized. I was wondering if you could lend me some clothes."

"So why can't you get the clothes from Janice?"

"Wrong size, Ruthie." At last she opens the door wider and lets him in. "Besides, she doesn't have your taste." He pauses, looking at Ruthie's back. She's standing in front of the wardrobe, looking through some skirts and blouses. "You're looking good, Ruthie."

She pauses to give him a withering glance over her shoulder, selects a cotton blouse in an all-over pattern of

pink flowers, and tosses it to him.

He takes it into the bedroom, and draws the curtain. He tells her about his figuring out how Manley was murdered. She says, "Huh." He wonders privately if Ruthie knows Cass has a part on *Intrigue*. He decides not to mention Cass's name. "I got a bra at the Salvation Army," he says. She doesn't answer. "Can I borrow some of your Kleenex?"

She pauses. "Sure."

He stuffs the bra with Kleenex; she walks back to the wardrobe. She casts a mean glance at the curtain. "Now let's see," she says, "what would go with that blouse?" She takes out a skirt with bright yellow stripes, sure to look horrible with it. "Ah, perfect." Then she draws the curtain aside a little, modestly averts her face, and hands it through to Bobby.

"Uh, um, uh. You got anything plainer?"

"No. That's perfect."

"Oh." He puts it on dubiously.

A little while later, he's in the living room, all dressed—nylons, earrings, handbag, the whole works—and putting on his lipstick, or her lipstick, as the final touch to his makeup. "Boy, what if I get rubbed out?"

Ruthie answers this appeal for sympathy with silence.

"Well, at least I got clean panties," he says.

Ruthie rolls her eyes. "Honestly!"

"They have F for Friday on them."

"I'm not worried about you. You can take care of yourself," she says, like an insult.

He decides to take it as a compliment. "That's true. I gotta remember that's true. Now for the shoes." He looks down at the high-heeled red pumps that Ruthie has brought out for him. "Those are beautiful." But when he puts them on and takes a few steps, he's hobbling in pain.

Ruthie watches in satisfaction. "Whatsa mattuh, Francine?" she says, affecting a Brooklyn accent, "doze uh da best shoes dat a team of men evuh designed," and the accent's on the "team of men."

Before he leaves, they stand at the door a minute, and Bobby looks at her wistfully. "Won't you even wish me luck?"

Her face is impassive. "Good luck."

Bobby's heart contracts. "Ruthie, where are you?" he cries out.

And now she's finally looking at his face, and her voice is full

of regret. "I don't know. I look at you, and I see a stranger."

He bows his head a moment, and turns and starts down the stairs, a ridiculous figure.

"Oh, come back," says Ruthie, with the sigh of martyr, "I'll find something better for you to wear."

After she's outfitted him in a nice, pale yellow suit and open-toe, sling-back shoes that hurt a little less, she asks, "So, uh, when can I get these back?" and he looks at her solemnly, and asks, "Couple of days?"

Finally she nods.

He does, too. "I'll call you." He pauses. "Dear heart." Then he says, in a rush, "All I ask is that you let me be your friend. If you can't accept me any more as a boyfriend, I'll try to find you a boyfriend who'll treat you better. I'll do anything for you, the rest of my life."

She looks at him for a long time, and she sort of whimpers behind her hand, and he can't tell if she's about to laugh or cry or what. "You have lipstick on your teeth," she says. Then she covers her mouth with both hands, and her shoulders are shaking.

Bobby puts his arms out, and she shrinks back, but when he says, "I'll call you then, and maybe we could have breakfast out or something?" she nods and waves him off with one

hand, so he leaves, and the door shuts behind him. But by the time he's on the street again, a spark of hope in his heart has flared into a bonfire of optimism, and he trips down the block, gaily swinging his handbag. His eyes are gleaming as he figures out how to get the goods on Grant.

He wonders if Cass is playing the lead, or what, on *Intrigue*. And how she's doing. Jeez, Cass Manley is as "controversial" as he is. Roy must have used his influence to get her the part. Pull, he thinks, it's all pull, all who you know. What happened to talent? Like in the old days, last month? But wait, that's another indication that Roy Grant and Cass have something going, right?

Friday, he thinks. It's a sure bet she'll go out tonight.

Nine guys have tried to pick Bobby up by the time Roy Grant comes out of his office at seven thirty that evening. Bobby trails him to the subway, onto a train going downtown. It's crowded; they both have to stand. Roy's nose is buried in a newspaper. Bobby's just two or three people away from him; at one point Roy scans Bobby's face, without interest. The ad executive is looking grumpy. He gets off at 8th

Street, in the Village, and Bobby follows him to a jazz joint, and enters a few minutes after he does. The place is still half empty. Bobby takes the table next to Roy, facing him. Roy takes out his paper again.

When the waitress comes—so thin and freckled and nervous she looks about twelve—Roy orders one scotch and soda and one bourbon and water, and Bobby's heart leaps at the significance of this.

Bobby orders a beer, and glances at his watch from time to time, and keeps looking over at the door, like he's waiting for his date. The waitress has just brought the drinks when a tall, slim young blonde woman in dark glasses enters and makes her way to Roy's table. Bobby recognizes her instantly: it's Cass, in a wig.

She stands there. She's wearing a tight black skirt and a silky, champagne-colored shirt. "Come here often?"

Roy glances up from his newspaper. "I'm waiting for someone, babe." Bobby feels like kicking him.

"Well, too bad," says the blonde, "finders keepers." And she sits down, and then Roy recognizes her, and stares at the wig with a broad smile. "Fabulous!" he says, giving voice to Bobby's own feelings: pay dirt—finally!

Cass fingers the blonde strands of hair. "Got me through the reporters, anyway. No questions this time. Just whistles."

"I bet!" says Roy. "Glad you're feeling better, babe. You get a nap?"

Cass's back is to Bobby. Her elbow moves out as she lifts her glass. "Who says I'm feelin' better?" Her tone is resentful.

"It'll all come together, sweetheart. By the time Tuesday rolls around."

"Shoot!" she says. "I wish you'd never got me into this." Bobby had thought she was talking about the show, but now he wonders if she's talking about Manley's murder. Then he realizes he was right the first time when she starts complaining about the crappy dialogue. She recites in singsong: "I asked him for a word, an' he give me the world. I asked him for a song, an' he give me the stars." She pauses. "Ain't nobody talks like that!"

"Gave."

"What?"

"He *gave* me the stars."

"Oh, shut your mouth, Roy!"

There's a long silence. Finally Roy says, well, she needn't take it out on him, and Cass says, well, that ain't why she's mad at him. "You wanna know why?"

Just then, a guy comes over to Bobby's table. "Mind if I sit down?"

Bobby is momentarily flustered, and the guy takes this as acquiescence, and sits in the other chair, his back to Cass.

"Well, actually—" Bobby says, and stops to hear what Cass is saying, in a tone of furious urgency: "Somebody saw you, Roy!"

The guy at Bobby's table has dirty hair and a rumpled shirt. "See, I decided tonight I should be more eclectic, see, I usually go for the same type—"

"So do I!" Bobby snaps at him, "the strong silent type!"

The guy scowls. "Well, sorry," he says sarcastically, and scrapes his chair unnecessarily loudly as he leaves. Then the jazz group starts playing, and Bobby can't hear anything from the next table.

He furtively moves to the other chair, so Cass and he are back-to-back, but he still can't hear what they're saying. From their voices he can tell that they're still fighting, though. A little later, Roy gets up from the table, and Bobby, watching him go toward the rear of the place, surmises that he's going to the men's room, and the group stops, and everybody applauds.

"So you been stood up, darlin'?" Cass has turned sideways in her chair.

Bobby beats down the fear that she has recognized him: he can tell from her voice that she hasn't. He flaps a hand. "He's always late," he says in his girl's voice.

"Men are such dogs," she says. "They're only good for one thing."

"I know what you mean." Bobby hesitates. "But the one you're with is so cute."

"Cute is as cute does," she says in a sulky tone, and adds, "I'm sorry, but I don't feel like talking any more." She turns her back on him again.

Well, you started the conversation, Bobby thinks, surprised and a little hurt. In a minute, Roy rejoins Cass. Bobby wouldn't mind going to the bathroom, too. But how? He can't go to the men's room, dressed like this, and he doesn't want to go to the ladies' room. The jazz group starts up again. The skinny little waitress stops at the next table, and Roy holds up two fingers and circles his hand over the two empty glasses, ordering another round, and when she comes to Bobby, he nods and points at his glass and tries to concentrate on what Roy and Cass are saying. All he can hear is a word or two, but when the set ends, Roy's voice rings out: "All right, I did it!"

So it wasn't Kevin or Cass, it was Roy Grant! Bobby is flooded with waves of relief, triumph, horror and excitement. And then they're both quiet a minute. His ears are straining so much he thinks he can almost hear Cass breathing, breathing hard.

"How do I know you won't kill me next?" she says. "No more killin'. Promise me."

Roy seems to take a deep breath. "I promise."

The waitress returns with a loaded tray: several tall glasses of beer and four or five short drinks and puts two of the beers in front of Roy and Cass.

Roy gives her a sharp look. "Way, way, wait," he says, like he's stuttering. "One scotch and soda, one bourbon and water."

"Oh, sorry. Sorry, it's my first night." She takes the beers back and gives them the right drinks and moves over to Bobby.

"Cheers. We'd have to get a virgin, right?" Roy growls to Cass.

"Darlin'!" Cass's voice is reproachful, and Bobby unconsciously turns his head to her and turns it back again.

At his table, the waitress says nervously, "You had the beer, right, miss?"

Bobby is eager to get out of there now. He asks for the tab,

and searches in his handbag for his wallet. The waitress wearily lowers her tray, and when Bobby raises his head again, it bumps the tray, and the glasses crash on the table, with two of them shattering, and beer and booze and ice cubes slither all over the table and into Bobby's lap.

The waitress is so upset that Bobby uses his Donald Duck voice on her. "You may think I take to water, miss, but ice cubes gives me the shivers!" She bursts into tears. Bobby shifts to his girl's voice: "I was just trying to make you feel better, hey, come on—"

The waitress tries to laugh, and all of a sudden, Cass is standing over Bobby, tugging at his wig, and Bobby's trying to hold it down.

"You dirty little rat!" Cass screeches, and she manages to pull off the wig, and she swats him with it, and with her left hand she grabs one of his arms, and now Roy also realizes it is Bobby, and he takes the other arm, and the waitress is standing back in alarm, and Roy and Cass hustle him out onto the sidewalk despite his protests, and they're hauling him toward a parked Mercedes when Detective Bill Roos appears on the other side of it, with gun drawn.

"Hold it right there!"

Cass drops Janice's wig, and the three of them raise their hands in the air, and another armed detective steps out of a doorway. "Or is this a rehearsal?" Roos asks.

"No!" Bobby yells. "Lieutenant Roos?"

"Hold it, Darling!" Roos barks. He circles them until he's on the sidewalk also, and tells them to turn around slowly.

"Boy, am I glad to see you, sir, listen—"

"Get over here, Darling. You two, step away from the car! And keep your hands up!"

The partner, who snorted the first time the lieutenant says "darling" to this kid dressed like a girl, now laughs outright. But his gun hand is steady, and the barrel of it gleams in the circle of light from a streetlamp next to the black Mercedes as Cass and Roy take a step forward. Pointing at Roy, Bobby blurts out: "Listen, he killed Gerald Manley! I heard him, he admitted it!"

Cass yells at Bobby, "You moron, he killed his moles!" and turns to yell at Roy, "The poor things!"

"In my lawn!" Roy yells at Bobby, then shouts at Cass, "You've never seen a mole in your life!"

"I have, too!"

"A likely story," Roos snarls at both of them.

"Yeah, right," Bobby says uncertainly.

Roos rubs his lip and gazes at Bobby. "I've been trailing you for days, kid. Thanks for leading us to the killer." Roy's hands fly to his head. "Don't make a move, Grant. We know the whole story."

Bobby lets out a whoop of victory. Grinning, he looks at Roy, and puts a hand under his shirt to scratch an itchy shoulder.

Cass screams, pointing at Bobby. "Search his bra! He's dangerous! He's crazy, I mean it!"

Roos hesitates. He jerks his head at his partner, and the guy quickly moves in front of Bobby and unbuttons his top.

"Please," says Bobby, looking at Cass, "do you think I'm made of steel?" When the partner pulls out the Kleenex, Bobby takes one from the top with a flourish and blows his nose.

"So you had plenty of strychnine left from the mole poison, huh, Grant?" Roos says.

"No!" Roy shouts. "This is an outrage!"

"And it was easy enough to slip it into the teapot, right, Grant?"

"I didn't!"

"He didn't! For God's sake!"

Cass is waving her arms and

stamping her feet in front of the detective.

Bobby yells, "He didn't, he put it in the sugar!"

"I didn't! I didn't touch the sugar bowl!"

At this, Bobby claps his hands over his mouth like he's going to be sick and walks away from them all.

They all stare at him, and Roos breaks the silence. "What's the matter, kid?" His voice is alarmed.

But Bobby is still paying attention to another voice resonating in his memory: the prop man's. Scolding him, warning him at his first rehearsal not to touch the props. There was only one person who could have carried that tray with the teapot and sugar from one set to another without catching hell from Kevin. And that was Kevin.

"Roy didn't do it," he says, and as he walks back, he says the same thing, louder. "Kevin did it. Kevin McBride. Kevin McBride, for God's sake!" And then, well, there he is, center stage, and without even thinking about it, he points at Roy and starts to improvise. "But you gave it to him, didn't you, Roy? I saw you give it to him, strychnine looks just like sugar."

Roy roars, "What?"

"What?" screeches Cass. She grabs at her head, and her blonde wig comes off in her hand, and she looks at it in amazement for a split second, and then starts whipping Bobby with it, making a figure eight in the air, like she's driving a team of horses. "You phony little rat actor! After I saved your life? You take that back, Bobby, you phony, you actor, you never saw Roy do that!"

Bobby is covering his face with his hands to get away from the hair—this is the second time in one night Cass has whipped him with a blonde wig, for God's sake, and then Cass throws it down on the sidewalk, and it lands next to the other one, and for a moment, he gazes between his hands at the two little hairy yellow hummocks, and then Cass grabs his shoulders and starts shaking him and cuffing his head. "All right, it was Roy's poison, but it was me give Kevin the damn stuff to use that night! Roy never even knew about it, you little phony, Bobby! You take that back! You take that back! You gonna take that back?"

Finally the pain stops, and Bobby feels his jaw to see if any teeth have rattled loose, and he notices that Roos and his partner are holding Cass, who's

kicking them sideways as she leans forward, raging at Bobby: "I hate actors! Hate 'em, hate 'em, hate 'em!"

Then she calms down, breathing hard, shaking her head at Bobby, and speaking low. "I saved your stupid life, Bobby. I made Kevin put it in the damn sugar bowl instead of the tea. Cuz you don't take cream and sugar. I watched at rehearsal, to make sure."

"Oh my God, Cass," Bobby says.

Roy is looking like she's hit him with a plank. And when Cass turns to him, her face crumples. "Well, I *tole* you about Jessie Kay! You think I was just gonna stand around and do nothin'?" She starts sobbing, and the two cops let go of her, and she leans over, rocking up and down, her legs as far apart as the tight skirt allows, her hands gripping her thighs, and her tears falling like rain on the sidewalk. Bobby realizes he's never seen her cry before.

So, of course, Cass is arrested as an accomplice and turns state's evidence. The copy desk goes nuts with the headlines.

MANN ACTOR'S SUGAR AND PROP MAN HELD IN TEA-V MURDER, stuff like that. Naturally, Kevin has to confess. On the stand, he testifies that Gerald Manley and he were both active in the Freedom Fighters, an anti-Commie group, "but all that stuff with the girlies, bringing them here, breaking the law like that, he was hurting the movement, don't you see?" Yeah. That's why he did it, no kidding. That's what he said, anyway.

Bobby's testimony starts out real serious, but by the end of it, he has the jurors rolling in the aisles. Well, you know what I mean.

He and Ruthie make up, naturally.

What?

I couldn't tell you. What, you mean before they tied the knot? I couldn't tell you. Listen, in those days—nowadays, in the papers, one of these days I'll read, The bride, who finally went all the way, carried roses and baby's breath. Or who didn't go all the—gimme a break. Let the parents think what they want, right?

Right.

UNSOLVED

by
Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

Ten inmates of the Lost Marbles Sanitarium are at work below (including one pair of identical twins whose names rhyme), all shackled to one another to prevent their escape. With the four clues provided, can you determine who is shackled to whom?

1. Wacky Willie is shackled to Daffy Darrell, who is shackled to Screwy Skip.
2. Mad Martin is shackled to Crazy Craig and Batty Barry.
3. Touched Tom, who has two convicts with shovels between himself and Loco Larry, is *not* shackled to Wacky Willie.
4. Nutty Ned, who has a shovel, is shackled to Gaga Gary, who is not shackled to Touched Tom.



See page 144 for the solution to the July puzzle.

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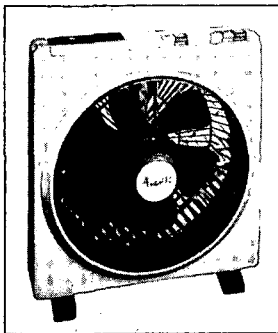


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FICTION



Inspector of the Five White Horses

by Martin
Limón

The urchin spun away from the royal guardsman, pushed past a richly robed government minister, and threw himself at the feet of the Great King Sejong Daewang.

He was a scrawny child, barely more than sinew and bone, and his skin and ragged clothing were covered with a thick layer of soot and grime. Black bristles stubbled his round head in uneven splotches. Many of the courtiers backed up and raised their hands to their noses. Only the king leaned forward on his throne. When the guards moved towards the boy, he waved them off.

"Away! Leave the child alone."

The boy lay face down. Unmoving.

"Look up at me, boy. And stand up. What brings you to the king's court on this fine morning?"

Slowly, on unsteady legs, the boy stood up. His voice was little more than a croak.

"Thievery, your honor."

"What's that?"

"Thievery. They stole my uncle's farm. Now me and my aunt have nothing."

"Your uncle, you say? Didn't he have any sons to inherit his farm?"

"No. Only me."

The boy's head lolled on his shoulders, and spittle formed on the edges of his mouth. As he fell, King Sejong jumped from his throne.

"Send for the royal physician!"

The king turned the boy over on his back, cradled his head in his arm, and slapped him lightly on the cheek. The boy's eyes cracked open.

"Tell me, boy, quickly. Where are you from?"

"Horang-chon." More spittle bubbled from his mouth. "Lies," he said. "The tiger in the mountains. All lies." His eyes rolled up until they were completely white, his body tensed and shivered, and as if someone were pushing down on a great bellows, the air rushed from his body.

King Sejong laid the boy down and rose to his feet.

"Tell the physician not to bother. The boy is dead."

He glanced fiercely around the room as if the wealthy courtiers had somehow been responsible for the boy's misfortune.

"Send for the royal mortician instead. And after that, dispatch my fastest rider to the home of the Inspector of the Five White Horses. I have a job for him."

Kang Huang-ho is one of those men who sits tall in the saddle and can ride all day and still look as fresh and as strong at the end of the day as he did the moment he started. His mind never wavers from his task, and no lie, however cleverly constructed, ever seems to befuddle his mind. His is like an arrow, launched by a half-conscious archer, that speeds unerringly to its target. And that is why the Great King Sejong, in his wisdom, appointed Kang Huang-ho as one of the royal inspectors, to be the king's eyes and ears in the realm of the kingdom of Korea. The king bestowed upon him the golden amulet that denotes the rank of the Five White Horses and always chooses Kang Huang-ho for his most sensitive missions.

He is an admirable person in every way. Thoroughly schooled in the teachings of Confucius, conversant in the Chinese classics, and possibly the only completely honest man in the realm, other than the king. Men are awed by the strength of his mind, but that strength comes not so much from a sharp intelligence as from a fullness of purpose. When he is on a case, his sense of purpose is like the inexorable march of a river that knows it wants to go to the sea.

Women, of course, find him fascinating.

I, a lowly scribe, am a little different. I believe there is no worse torture in this world than to sit on the back of a bony ass all day over a wheel-rutted road. At day's end I want only to attend the public bathhouse at whatever village we find ourselves in and rest the fleshy sack of aches and sores that is my body. And I am willing to pay any price for a luxurious inn, but on the road there are few. I am meek and shy for good reason. My body is frail and my eyes myopic, and the great ladies of the court don't dislike me, they simply don't notice me. I am a scribe. A machine. A tool for the wealthy. It is my duty to record their august words and their magnificent deeds. After years of having my round nose buried in books, I have a pretty good feel for them, and I write a fairly tolerable script. And although I'll never reach the heights of the immortal Chinese historian Ssu-ma Chien, I have, from time to time, received compliments for my chronicles. Even one from the Great King Sejong. For a narrative I wrote on his struggle to institute our newly-devised *hangul* script. He, of course, is the king who appointed a commission to devise a written alphabet for our own Korean language—not that any of us use it. Chinese characters are still the written language of the court, but I don't hold

that against him. He's a very fair and honorable king, and I was greatly honored and surprised to be appointed by him to be the clerk of Kang Huang-ho, an inspector of the rank of the Five White Horses.

The king's inspectors are known throughout the realm as the scourge of evildoers. Anyone who abuses his position or takes money from the poor or does not live up to the high ethical standards of a Confucian scholar can expect swift punishment if ferreted out by one of the king's inspectors. The Inspectors of One White Horse take care of the routine jobs: checking the ledgers of the royal granaries, monitoring the records of the quartermaster of the royal guard. The tasks become increasingly complex as the inspectors attain the ranks of Two, Three, and Four Horse Inspectors. The Five Horse Inspectors, however, like my master Kang Huang-ho, tackle only jobs specifically designated by the king. Jobs that require the utmost in daring and courage.

It was the courage part that always had me worried.

It took my master and me a half day of searching through the royal charts to find the village of Horang-chon. If it hadn't been for my stumbling upon an ancient chart in a musty archive left over from the Three Kingdoms Period, I wouldn't have found it at all.

Horang-chon is a tiny village which at one time must have been successful but for the last few centuries has been almost forgotten. It sits in the foothills of the Spirit Mountains far to the north near the border of the land the Chinese call Man Zhou. It is such a small village, and so remote, that I wondered if maybe even the tax collectors had forgotten it. But somehow I doubted that.

My master had decided that our first stop would be the prefectural court of North Pyongan Province in the city of Huichon.

He turned in his saddle to look at me, twisting his body at the waist instead of swiveling his head like normal people do.

"Do not despair, Honorable Scribe, we are but a few *li* from the prefectural court, where you can take your well-deserved rest."

He's always very formal with me. Everyone else just calls me Clerk Jo.

"Thank you, sire, but my thoughts are only on the mission."

"Then why do you fidget so in your saddle?"

"It's this ass, sir. I think he has an extra ridge on his back that was put there strictly to torment me."

Kang Huang-ho smiled indulgently and turned away again. If he has a sense of humor, I haven't spotted it yet.

When we entered the City of Huichon, there was quite a hubbub because the guards at the gate of the walled city had seen the Five Horse amulet which my master was wearing openly and immediately sent a runner to the prefectural palace. We were provided an escort, and by the time we arrived at the great wooden portico to the palace, the magistrate himself was out front, bowing and genuflecting. Flanking him were some of his more important ministers and advisers. To me, they looked like used donkey salesmen.

Servants took our mounts; it felt wonderful to be on solid ground again. I wanted nothing more than to repair to the luxurious accommodations in the palace and, after a hot bath, call for a young girl to walk on my weary back. Inspector Kang, however, seemed invigorated by this chance to serve his king, and soon I found myself in the study of the prefectural magistrate. After introductions, I got out my ink stone, brush, and writing paper. The magistrate and his advisers looked properly solemn at the visit of a representative of the Great King Sejong Daewang.

"Greetings from our Great King," my master began. "It has been so many months since a royal representative of any rank has visited your prosperous prefect that the king thought it due time to pay our respects."

"Are you here on any particular business?" the magistrate asked.

"No. Just a general inspection tour. And I must say that during this autumn season it will be particularly delightful to see the changing of the leaves in your snowcapped mountains."

The magistrate bowed. "We are here to make your visit as pleasurable as possible."

The conversation turned to financial matters—taxes, disbursements—and although I recorded it all faithfully in my notes, I paid attention to none of it. Criminal reports were also taken, and Inspector Kang paid particular attention to the tiger that had been causing havoc in the countryside, asking questions about dates, times, places, and number of people killed. The red tea that was served was excellent, imported from Southern China I suspected, but finally my master took his leave and we repaired to our quarters.

The young girl who massaged me had the most agile toes my spine had ever experienced.

At the banquet hall that evening the food was so delicious and the dancing girls with their drums so delightful that I'm afraid I forgot to pay attention to how many cups of *soju* I had with my meal. And when another beautiful young woman plucked on her *kayagum* and sang a plaintive song of love unrequited, the wine flowed far too fast. But at least no one in the hall paid any attention to the babblings of a lowly clerk, no matter how much I bragged about the prowess of my master.

I did notice that all the ladies at court glanced at him over their sleeves whenever they got a chance. When he turned his head, however, they turned away, and my noble master never noticed their interest.

Sometime later he carried me back to my room. I'm not sure when.

The next day's journey was much worse than the three days' travel that preceded it. We climbed almost straight up, into the mountains, and my little ass protested all the way. When he turned to bite me, I kicked him in the teeth. That kept him moving.

My master, on his noble white steed, pranced ahead of us, both man and beast in love with the lush colors of nature and the freshness of the chill morning air.

We stopped at mountain villages and drank of clear well water. My stomach kept protesting, asking why I had imbibed so much rice wine last night and punishing me, like a fist pounding against my innards.

At last we reached the village of Horang-chon, situated between mountains in a fertile valley. Fallow rice paddies stretched before us, interspersed with apple groves and plots of fat green cabbages.

At the only inn in Horang-chon we ate a lunch of a steaming bowl of noodles, and my master immediately began his inquiries. The people of the village were quite upset with the prefectural magistrate because the taxes were far too high. Of course we hear this complaint everywhere, so my master didn't pay much attention to it. One kindly old lady at the open air market peered at my master over her pyramid of apples and told us who the urchin who had flung himself in front of the king must be. Widow Hong lived two *li* out of town, under the face of the mountain to the north. Her husband had recently been killed by a terrible tiger that had been prowling these parts.

"A tiger?" my master asked.

"Yes. A very ferocious one." The old woman bared her gums at us, as if to demonstrate.

"Has the beast killed anyone else around these parts?"

"No. Only poor old Farmer Hong, but he is a very terrible tiger nonetheless."

"Yes. I'm sure he must be."

My master bought two apples, gave me one, and bade farewell to the old woman.

As we walked the narrow pathway between rice paddies toward the home of the Widow Hong, we munched on our apples.

"Why would a young boy," my master asked, "travel all the way to the court of our Great King just to complain about a tiger killing his uncle?"

I started to correct him about the boy's main complaint, but he kept talking.

"The reason is, of course, that it wasn't so much his uncle's death that bothered him, but that he wasn't able to inherit the farm and someone 'took it away' from his aunt, this woman Widow Hong that we are going to see. It sounds reasonable enough. A woman can't work a farm by herself, and the nephew wasn't a legal heir, so maybe someone purchased the farm from her out of kindness."

"More likely because he could get an excellent price."

My master stopped chomping on his apple and looked at me. His brows furrowed.

"Take advantage of a widow?"

I swallowed slowly. "It happens."

Unconsciously my master reached for the hilt of his sword. For a moment I thought he was going to decapitate me, but he just stared ahead towards the mountains and lengthened his stride.

I threw my apple away.

The Widow Hong looked at us through eyes clouded by the film of blindness. She seemed frightened at first, but when my master spoke to her soothingly, she slid back the door of her hut and let us in. We sat on the floor. It was cold. She obviously couldn't afford charcoal for the heating flues beneath the floor. She made no pretense of preparing tea but simply waited.

"We bring news of your nephew. He is dead. He died in the court of the Great King Sejong Daewang."

The woman recoiled and glanced about desperately. "But what had he done?"

"He did nothing. He has brought no shame to your family, so do not worry. He went to the king to complain about the way his uncle's farm was taken away from you. He died before he could fully explain. I am here to find out if justice hasn't been served."

"Justice?"

"Yes. Did you get a fair price for your husband's farm?"

The woman looked confused. She picked at strands of gray hair that had fallen loose from the bun tied above her head.

"I got paid for the farm," she said. "But how am I to know if I got a fair price? I never sold a farm before. They gave me some money and said that the farm was no longer mine."

"Who were they?"

"Men. Men in fine clothes. Men riding horses. Everyone said they were representatives of the prefectural magistrate."

"How much did they pay you?"

"It is here." The old woman turned, reached behind her, and thrust a bowl in front of my master. The bowl was half filled with bronze coins.

"Is that all?"

"No. There was more. I've spent most of them already."

"Do you know how your husband was killed?"

"Yes. By a tiger."

"How do you know?"

"Everyone said so. Even the men on the horses said he was killed by a tiger."

"You weren't with him then?"

"No. He was at the tavern."

"At the tavern?"

"Yes. He went there once a month, whenever we sold a chicken, to gossip with the other men."

"But surely a tiger didn't kill him at the tavern?"

"No. They say that he went out into the woods after he left the tavern. No one knows why. And the tiger killed him there."

"Had he ever done that before? Gone out into the woods, at night, after drinking at the tavern?"

"No. He always came straight home. He never could afford more than three cups. Besides, it made him sick. I used to hold him sometimes, when he vomited."

The woman began to cry. Tears rolled slowly out of blind eyes.

The muscles in my master's face hardened to stone. We rose and left.

*

The owner of the tavern was a portly, smiling man who kept bowing to my master, punctuating every other word with his nodding head.

He said that Farmer Hong had indeed been at his tavern on the night he died and, as usual, he had quietly drunk his three cups of rice wine and left. No, no one had left with him and, yes, everyone was worried about the tiger returning although no one had seen any evidence of him since then.

My master questioned many other villagers. I diligently kept up with him, taking notes, but everyone testified that they knew little or nothing about Farmer Hong's death.

As we walked back to the stable to retrieve our mounts, I rejoiced inwardly.

"So we return to the capital?"

My master reached for the hilt of his sword once again. "Are you mad? These people wear their fear like a heavy winter cloak."

"Maybe it's the tiger?"

He laughed. I was afraid to ask what was so funny. Like I said, I still haven't figured out his sense of humor, or if he's got one.

As we left the village and rode towards the mountains, my master sensed my puzzlement.

"We ride to see a tiger of the two-legged variety. A man who was recommended to me by the Great King Sejong himself."

"The king knows someone who lives in these mountains?"

"Yes. A man who guided him on the hunting expeditions of his youth. A man known as the Tiger of the Spirit Mountains."

The Tiger of the Spirit Mountains looked like a stoop-shouldered little old man to me. But after he helped us dismount and jerked my disrespectful little donkey into the shelter next to his cabin, I gained a little more respect for the old man's strength and his mastery over animals.

He bowed deeply to Inspector of the Five Horses Kang. Less deeply to me.

"Hail, Hunter Liang," my master said. "I bring you greetings from the Great King Sejong."

The old man's eyes sparkled. "And how is the brash young sprite now? Uncomfortable with the intrigues of the royal court, I suspect."

My master cleared his throat. Not sure how to respond.

"The Great King bade me seek your counsel on a matter of great import."

"Well, if it is a matter of great import, come into my cabin and rest yourselves. It's a long, weary ride from the lowlands." I had to agree with that.

The inside of his cabin was crammed with hides and furs and claws and fangs. He pushed a number of smelly objects aside and motioned for us to sit down. While he heated some barley tea, my master got on with business.

"There has been word of a tiger prowling these parts. Near Horang-chon. He killed a farmer there only three weeks ago, leaving a nephew and a blind widow. We have come for your assistance in capturing this tiger."

The old man brought back the pot of tea, wiped out two cups with his dirty forefinger, and poured.

"You're right about part of what you said, wrong about the rest."

"Explain, Hunter Liang."

The old man sat down and sipped gratefully at his tea. It was probably a luxury he didn't allow himself unless he got visitors from the royal court, which in this place wouldn't be often.

"You're right that there was a tiger prowling the area around Horang-chon. He's an old friend of mine. We travel together often, following the migrations of the mountain goats. But you're wrong about his killing that farmer."

"How do you know?"

"I know him. He may be an old tiger, but he still has his strength and his wits about him. He captures mountain goats and other beasts that are unfortunate enough to stray near his path, but he has never attacked humans. Hasn't had the need so far. When he's old and toothless, maybe. But so far he hasn't had to stoop that low."

"You seem certain."

"I am certain. It is my business to know the animals of these mountains."

"These migrations you speak of. Can you give us some idea of where the tiger is likely to be during various parts of the year?"

"Of course I can."

My master motioned to me. I pulled the chart out of my bag and spread it on the floor between us.

"These are the Spirit Mountains," my master said.

The old hunter's eyes widened. "These are not the Spirit Mountains! This is merely a sheet of paper. With many squiggly lines and pretty colors, I grant you, but just a sheet of paper nonetheless."

"It represents the mountains. Here." My master turned the chart toward the old hunter and started pointing out landmarks. Mountains, villages, forests. Soon the old man got the idea and beamed with pleasure.

"Yes. What a good idea." Suddenly his smile dropped, and wrinkles stood out against his weathered old face. "But you won't have all sorts of city folks tramping around these mountains now that they have this sheet of paper and know how to get around, will you? They will scare away the game."

"Don't worry, old man. King Sejong commissioned these charts for his own purposes only. No one else has access to them."

"Well, if only *he* comes up here . . ."

"Show me the migrations of the tiger."

The old man showed us, and I took careful note of everything he said. When he finished, my master clapped the palms of his hands on his knees.

"Hunter Liang, now you must come with us on another hunt. A hunt that could prove to be the greatest of your life."

The old man squinted at us. "I remember what a strong young man Sejong was, and what a fast-learning pupil. If he commands it, I will go."

"He commands it."

With that we were up, and in ten minutes the old hunter had readied his Mongolian pony and joined us.

"Where to?" I asked my master.

"First back to Horang-chon, briefly, and then to the village of Chonsan-up."

"But that is in the valley where the old man says we are most likely to find the tiger."

"Precisely."

"But I thought you had decided that it hadn't been the tiger who killed Farmer Hong or any of the other victims?"

"That's correct."

"Then why do we search for him?"

"Check your chart, scribe." I pulled it out. "Now note carefully the dates and places of death of the other supposed victims of the tiger that were given to us by the prefectural magistrate."

It took me a few minutes. "Why, they match the wanderings of the tiger precisely."

"Yes. And the people who live in each area would have been sure to note the prowling of the tiger. So when one of their number turned up dead, it did not seem so remarkable to them."

I scratched my topknot. "This only supports what the prefectural magistrate maintains. That the tiger was responsible for the deaths."

"Yes. But all those killed were men, no women and no children. And each of them was a farmer with relatively large landholdings." Kang Huang-ho, Royal Inspector of the Five White Horses, looked at me and smiled. "Does it not seem strange to you, scribe, that this tiger, a beast of the wilderness, has such a finely attuned taste for real estate?"

With that he laughed, a great hearty laugh. The hunter joined him. My face turned red, and I swatted my donkey's lazy rear.

Grass-covered mounds blotted the hillside. We crept carefully through the graveyard, reading the stone markers by the light of the moon.

"Here it is," the hunter whispered. "The grave of Farmer Hong."

It took my master and the old hunter an hour of hard digging to uncover the body. My master's broad jaws tightened as he unwrapped the corpse. Hunter Liang flinched when the dead flesh was brought into the moonlight, but his facial features remained impassive.

"Knife wounds," he said. "Maybe an axe. He hasn't been clawed. And besides, a tiger would have chewed out his throat and his belly."

The two men rewrapped the body and recovered it with earth.

I reminded myself of Confucius' exhortation to reject superstition, but still it seemed that ghosts swirled in the night wind that rolled out of the Spirit Mountains.

I didn't like the poor rags that my master made me wear, but when we entered the village of Chonsan-up, no one paid any attention to two wandering merchants down on their luck. We found lodgings at the cheapest inn in town, and my master played his role to the hilt, exhorting whoever would listen to purchase an overpriced set of brassware that he had brought in his saddlebags.

Hunter Liang waited, with our mounts, in an agreed-upon spot in the mountains.

It was tedious living in such uncomfortable quarters, the only compensation our nightly visits to the village tavern. But the strong rice liquor favored thereabouts only gave me a bad stomach and a headache.

On the third night the strangers arrived.

One was friendly and robust, the other two sat by themselves, sullen, and guzzled the cheap wine. The robust one asked many questions, claiming to be a merchant of farm tools, but the folk around there told him that they fashioned their own. They couldn't afford those manufactured in the big cities. The only farmer who could possibly afford new tools, they told him, was Farmer Roh, who had the largest plots on the other side of Dragon Creek, near the forest that leads into the mountains.

"Doesn't he ever come to the tavern?" the robust one asked. "I would like to talk to him about my merchandise."

The local men laughed at him.

"Not him," the tavern owner said. "His wife won't let him squander money on drink. His only pleasures are his visits at dawn to the shrine on the hill behind Dragon Creek. There he can pray to Buddha every morning and ask for a more understanding wife in his next life."

The men guffawed at this, and after a few more bawdy jokes the robust stranger returned to his sullen comrades. For the rest of the evening they whispered amongst themselves.

When the tavern closed, we followed them. To my consternation we found that they were staying in the most expensive-looking inn in the village. A rather comfortable looking place it was, too. After they entered, I thought we would return to our own inn, but instead my master turned to me.

"Go to Hunter Liang."

"Now?"

"Yes. Now. Tell him to be at the Buddhist shrine on the hill behind Dragon Creek two hours before dawn. You must be there with him."

"Me?"

"Yes. You must both be armed and ready for anything."

I gulped, saw the straight line of his brows across his eyes, and knew better than to argue.

"Yes, master," I said and trudged off into the night. Oh, how I longed for my warm bed at the royal court.

Hunter Liang chose a spot for me behind some rocks.

"When you see someone, signal me by holding up fingers for the number of people coming up the path."

"But I can't even see the shrine, much less the path."

"You will. When the first rays of the sun peek above the mountains."

With that, he left me. I sat shivering in the cold, thinking of my warm study, and my books, and a hot pot of tea.

When the first glimmers of sunlight appeared, my legs were cramped and stiff. I heard footsteps coming up the path. I held up one finger, not knowing if Hunter Liang saw me or not.

A man wearing a thick cloak and hood approached the shrine. He squatted in front of it, pulled some implements out of his cloak, and started a small fire. Soon he had lit some sticks of incense and waved them expertly around the shrine to ward off any evil spirits that might have the temerity to be lingering about the image of the Lord Buddha.

I am not a Buddhist myself, preferring to stick to the rationalism of the teachings of the Great Sage Confucius, but I respect the religion. As long as they don't get pushy, that is.

As I was thinking these lofty theological thoughts, I noticed something darting through the woods. I wasn't sure what it was, so I wasn't sure whether I should hold up any fingers. I looked around for Hunter Liang, hoping to make some sort of sign, but the woods around me were silent save for the rippling of the wind through the red and yellow leaves. I noticed more movement—whatever was prowling through the underbrush was getting closer to the man at the shrine. Suddenly three shapes leapt out of the woods. I stood to shout, but before any words could get out of my mouth, the man at the shrine had thrown off his coat, swiveled, and slashed backwards with a gleaming blade just as an axe whistled past his ear.

The other figures approached the man, and I could see that they were the sullen louts at the tavern. Both flailed double-edged axes in front of them.

Like lightning, a white pony shot down the hill. Astride it, standing upright in the stirrups, was Hunter Liang. An arrow zinged forward and found its mark in the chest of one of the ruffians.

Before the horse had taken three more steps, Hunter Liang had reached back into his quiver, cocked another arrow in the bow, and let it fly. This one also found its mark, and before the two mortally wounded men could hit the dust, he let loose four more arrows into their twisted bodies.

I realized now that the man still fighting the first intruder was my master, Inspector of the Five White Horses Kang Huang-ho.

Hunter Liang pulled his pony up and gave the two room to fight. The robust ruffian we had seen last night in the tavern swirled the double-edged axe around his head and, halfway into his spin, shot forward at my master, who sidestepped and slashed downwards on the handle of the axe, knocking it out of his hand. With the point of his sword he forced the ruffian to his knees. Hunter Liang hopped off his pony, pulled out a length of rope, and quickly bound the villain hand and foot.

By the time I got down the hill, the two men were relaxed and joking.

"Ah, brave scribe. So good of you to join us."

"But it happened so quickly."

"Yes," Hunter Liang said. "That is the way of killing."

The ruffians with arrows in them had stopped twitching. Hunter Liang retrieved our mounts and draped the still breathing ruffian over the bony back of my little donkey.

I looked around frantically. "But where shall I ride?"

"It is only a short walk," my master said, "and we will not speed ahead of you."

"As long as you march smartly," Hunter Liang said.

It was forty *li* back to Huichon.

"But my advisers and I know nothing of such a plot," the prefectoral magistrate said. "Surely you must be mistaken. Maybe this one group of ruffians did have evil intentions against Farmer Roh, but I can assure you, I have it on the best authority that the other victims were mauled and partially eaten by that horrible tiger that prowls our lands."

"But the ruffian claims you and your advisers hired him to do this work," Hunter Liang said.

"An obvious liar," the magistrate said. "Trying to divert attention from his own guilt."

My master nodded in agreement. "Of course, the word of a ruffian does not amount to much." Hunter Liang's eyes widened. My mas-

ter turned towards him. "Time for you to return, good hunter, to your real work."

I wanted to shout, but I kept my counsel. This didn't seem at all like Kang Huang-ho, Inspector of the Five White Horses. Outside he spoke earnestly to the hunter in private, and the old man scowled as he mounted his pony and rode off towards the mountains.

For two days we relaxed in the palace of the prefectural magistrate, feasting every night. There was nothing that was too good for us. I was quite getting to enjoy it. My master whiled away the daylight hours auditing the ledgers of the prefectural bookkeeper. Maybe, I thought, his decision to ignore the evidence was the best thing after all. Certainly no one else would be killed. And who was hurt? Only a few old widows.

Someone kicked me awake. A soldier. He wore the handcrafted armor of the royal guard.

"To the magistrate's courtroom. Now!"

I slipped into my trousers and leggings and put on my tunic as I scurried down the hall.

King Sejong paced back and forth across the courtroom. The magistrate and his advisers knelt with their foreheads touching the floor. Soldiers guarded the doorways, and I heard the prancing of horses out in the courtyard.

To my surprise, Hunter Liang, his bow across his back, stood next to my master, the Inspector of the Five White Horses.

King Sejong lifted the ledgers off the desk and threw them down in front of the quivering magistrate.

"Here is the proof!" he said. "The landholdings of each one of the farmers who were supposedly killed by the mountain tiger were bought by either you or one of your closest advisers. For a pittance. The widows weren't cared for, the daughters and orphans were left to starve. You sent a group of ruffians out to kill for you and profited from the suffering of those you were appointed to protect. No crime could be greater. Fortunately, my wise inspector here sent Hunter Liang, my old friend, to the court to inform me of your misdeeds. And while he waited here, he inspected your records of title deeds to wrap the noose of evidence more tightly around your necks. No. I will not kill you now. You will be allowed your day before the Royal Court, but I don't expect it to go too well for you. You, scribe, do you still have your notes on everything that transpired?"

"Yes, your majesty. Everything has been recorded."

"Good. And you, faithful inspector. Do you expect the case against these men to go well?"

"We have all the evidence we need. Thanks to Hunter Liang, and my hardworking scribe."

King Sejong turned to Hunter Liang and put his hand on his shoulder. "Old friend, you are the man who taught me the ways of the woods and how to fight like a Mongol. I don't have thanks for you but only another request."

"What is it, Great King?"

"You must take on another job."

"Shooting scoundrels is not much sport, King Sejong. They are much less wily than the beasts of the forest."

"No. You speak too soon, Hunter Liang. The job I give you is to become magistrate of this prefect. Effective immediately."

"Magistrate? But I couldn't. I know nothing of politics or administration. I don't even know how to read."

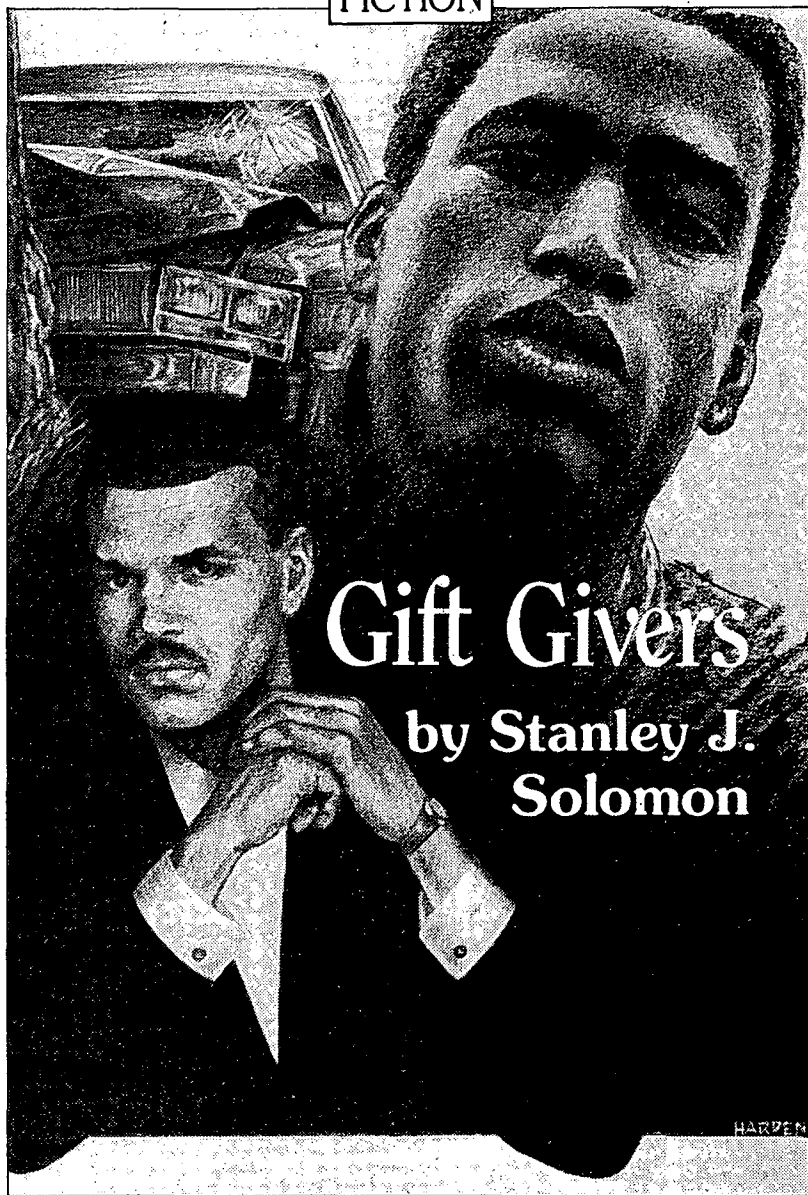
"Worry not about those things, they are but details. As magistrate you will embark on the greatest hunt of your life. The hunt for justice."

"And what kind of tracks does this 'justice' leave?"

"Not many, I'm afraid, but when you see its mark, you will know that it has passed." With that the king turned away from the new governor. "And so it is done. Captain of the Guard, mount up our men and take these scoundrels into custody; we return now to the capital."

It was a long ride back and my little donkey seemed particularly petulant, as if he knew that I'd suffer any indignity if he just got me to the warm comforts of the palace. I kicked and punched him all the way. And I did my best to hide the thought, even from myself, that I had doubted my master, Kang Huang-ho, the Royal Inspector of the Five White Horses.

FICTION



Gift Givers

by Stanley J.
Solomon

HARDEN

I had been working on the case for a week without much progress, and I had started with a pretty full report another investigator had completed a year ago. There wasn't a whole lot of nefarious activity that Manfred Gaines could have engaged in during this last year, being now a truly prominent citizen in his small town, North Tracton, nor was there much there for him to steal in the first place. As the richest man by far in the area, he didn't have much incentive for that, either.

But the recent past wasn't really the focus of my delving. Dr. Thaddeus Parnell, the president of Gardener College, had asked me to go over the past with complete confidentiality—that was why he had come all the way down to Manhattan in the first place. A dignified older man who walked with a cane, Parnell had driven a hundred and fifty miles to Manhattan by himself to consult with Lowery-Matthews, Private Investigations, on a school matter. And he didn't want any of the school's trustees to know; in fact, he was going to pay me from his own funds, for up to a week. He considered it a gift to his school. When I agreed, I was pretty sure I'd have the information for him by that time, but I hadn't, and I was just gen-

erous enough to extend my work for a couple of days at no charge. It was my gift to Gardener College, though my accountant wouldn't see it that way.

It wasn't merely a matter of Gardener College's needing the money—every private college in the country needs money, and most of them claim desperation all the time. The fact was that if my investigation came up with some significant dirt on Manfred Gaines—like a body festering in his cellar—Gardener College was going to turn down a soon-to-be-announced donation from that town's industrialist of ten million dollars. As Dr. Parnell put, "Ten million dollars, Mr. Lowery, is ten times the school's present endowment, and it means fifty full scholarships to poor but truly talented inner-city minority kids around the state, plus a new wing on the science building, plus a hundred computers, plus, well, a six percent salary increase for my beleaguered faculty."

At first I didn't want the case because the origins of suspicion were entirely distasteful and overtly prejudiced: Manfred Gaines was a black man without roots in the community. He had built an enormous shoe factory outside North Tracton about five years ago, receiving

every conceivable tax benefit from the county, and in return had apparently rescued the town and the whole county from a prolonged recession just as the local car assembly plant closed down. Now he was not only the largest employer in the area, the savior of an almost all-white middle class town, but also the town philanthropist. He was married with three children attending the local public schools. And his immense house's lawn was immaculately kept—the maintenance of it seeming to be rather surprising to a town that had, I suppose, assumed an affinity between black people and weeds. Dr. Parnell by no means subscribed to the racial stereotypes of his town but laid out the situation as cautionary information.

As I heard it, there was only one thing wrong with Manfred Gaines: he wanted to be socially accepted. He apparently succeeded as far as possible in that the exclusive West Park Country Club had admitted him with Dr. Parnell's prodding a couple of years ago, accepting three resignations from lifetime members who didn't like the idea of their wives dining with the uppity Mr. and Mrs. Gaines—not simply because they were black but (it was suspected) because they

were rich blacks who looked uncomfortably like a mature Harry Belafonte and Diana Ross.

Now, I wasn't stupid enough to take on an investigation to discover illicit activities buried in the past of a local businessman. My intention was really just the opposite, to find his past as clean as his known present. After all, I had in hand the report of W. Lloyd Pomerance, the Albany P.I. that Gardener College had hired the previous year to check on Gaines. I knew Pomerance. A stuffy character who had worked for me indirectly, that is, for my agents at Lowery-Matthews when they needed reliable services in the archives of the state government, he was an unimaginative man but a solid researcher, with a real touch for locating records and documents that archivists insisted were either missing or not public record.

Well, Pomerance hadn't found anything. I pointed out to Dr. Parnell that the first investigation was, on the face of it, pretty conclusive.

"Of course it was," he answered. "We at the college didn't know what to make of a hundred thousand dollar donation by a newcomer to the town, with no ties to the college. The rumors about Mr. Gaines were obviously racially inspired:

that he was a drug dealer from Chicago, that he had served time at Folsom Prison for armed robbery, things like that. We took the money first and investigated second. But the report isn't absolutely complete, and now—in light of the much larger proposed gift—all of it should be verified."

"I'm looking at the gaps right here: went to grade school in Fort Worth, Texas, but we don't know where he went to junior high school. You think he might have been holding up the Pony Express when he was thirteen? And here Pomerance notes that Gaines's official company biography claims that he worked at manual labor jobs for a year between graduating from high school and going to college that can't be independently verified, but that's normal for low level jobs and small companies. That's not worth your putting up new money to reinvestigate. You've got to tell me what you're hoping to find."

"Absolutely zero. There's ten million dollars at stake! My fondest hope is nothing more than perhaps some pecadilloes; even an out-of-wedlock child wouldn't matter. Don't tell me about women he might have seduced or any women he might still be seducing. For ten million dollars, I'd try to seduce our mayor, Mrs. Cornevsy.

Pardon me, every word of this conversation must remain confidential. The point I'm making, Mr. Lowery, is that I don't want the college three years from now, or five years, to be known as having been dependent on money from criminal activities. My God, we're changing the name of our administration building to Manfred Gaines Hall!"

"Manfred Gaines, the serial killer?" I said, straight-faced—but it almost knocked him off his chair.

"Exactly. You must make sure about that, at least."

"Dr. Parnell, if you hadn't shown me this report, I would start first by calling Pomerance and having him go through the same investigation. What in the world is the source of suspicion of Gaines other than that he's a black man and not an alumnus? Every couple of years someone who still believes in higher education is persuaded to give ten million bucks to a college. It makes the *New York Times*, with the donor's photo."

"It will be in the form of an anonymous gift, though I suppose every single person in town will know. The IRS will know, and the FBI. If anything is wrong, we must not accept that money. We're particularly leery about organized crime."

"In North Tracton? Three dairy farmers come into town of a Saturday night and shake down the Dairy Queen for protection money?"

"There's organized crime twenty miles away in Albany."

"Yeah, they call that the New York State Legislature."

"Truthfully, Mr. Lowery, I don't expect nor desire you to find out anything. I just want a thorough report to file away in a drawer—just in case it'll prove that we were assiduous and showed prudence and discretion."

"And if he finds out you've looked into his past?"

"We could lose the donation. And that would hurt the college immeasurably. Or perhaps nothing would happen. I don't know him all that well. But if it turned out that Gaines's fortune was mob money—we're a school with integrity. We won't take dirty money."

I didn't know what clean money was, but I'm a sucker for anyone who tries to distinguish. Sure, I took his retainer, put it in the "Clean Money" drawer, and promised him the utmost care. "I'll walk on tip-toes," I told him.

What I did, basically, was to go over Pomerance's ground, and it checked out. Gaines, as a young entrepreneur, with a

Rutgers University degree in business administration, latched on to an assistant buyer's position at a Jersey department store at age twenty-three. Six months later he was the head buyer. A year later he had the same job at a national chain. From there to a vice presidency at a haberdashery manufacturer. At thirty-three, he was one of four partners who set up a small chain of men's clothing outlets in black neighborhoods. The rest was the realization of the American dream. It made a good story. You could account for Manfred Gaines's accumulation of wealth in an orderly, documented way. It seemed a fairly good bet that he never took time off to get involved with organized crime. Short of getting hold of his tax returns, I couldn't see where to look further to unearth questionable activities. Borrowing to reinvest, buying out his partners, getting venture capital from banks with bad consciences for not previously lending to minorities, great timing—the outline was all there. Then, picking up some affirmative action contracts from the government—he built his shoe company on army boots. Now he makes millions of pairs of low priced sneakers with off-brand labels. If he had been sticking up banks on a weekly basis to

supplement his earnings, I wasn't going to find out about it. No arrests, no major lawsuits, no bankruptcies.

Yeah, it was too good to be completely believable. But that only meant that whatever sins didn't get into the record were small ones. And for once I was happy not finding anything. I was being paid, in effect, not to find anything.

But it was a bit too good to make me feel I had done a complete job. If only I had found some negatives—a drunk and disorderly charge, a divorce action—nothing. I was getting uncomfortable.

During the week I had spent on Manfred Gaines, I had managed to stay out of his sight, even out of town. I obtained what I needed—copies of his birth certificate, his marriage certificate, his driver's license—damn it, I had even traced previous plant site licenses, EPA analyses, bank loans, corporate rating authorities, and the recommendations of three town chiefs of police at former addresses. It had been all office/computer/telephone work. In fact, one of my agents, Ernie Chalmers, working with my office manager Ellen Westkitt, had done about two-thirds of the work so my afternoons were free for other cases. Given that extra time, I had tracked

down a couple of disappearing husbands who seemed to have forgotten all about their child support obligations, so the week had some satisfaction in it.

Still, the Gaines investigation was nagging at me. In my business, I don't work among the angels; the file on Gaines was starting to sprout wings and levitate. I went through it over and over.

His college transcript didn't say much. His grades, of course, were excellent. Why didn't he go on to graduate school? I answered the question myself: probably needed money; probably had borrowed to get through college and wanted to work off some debt, though he had a full scholarship. Later on, he might not have seen much reason for graduate school when he was doing so well without it. I tossed the academic records aside—they didn't seem at all helpful.

Thirty-three years had passed since Gaines's graduation. I supposed some of his teachers might still be around, and if they remembered him, maybe they could tell me something about him. Like what? Whether he raised his hand or just called out in class? Who can be judged by what he was thirty-odd years ago anyway?

I looked at his yearbook picture that Ernie had Xeroxed for me at the Rutgers library—Ernie lives in Jersey and doesn't mind library work. Although I hadn't seen Gaines in person, his graduation picture was almost identical to the most recent newspaper clipping Dr. Parnell had given me, except for a receding hairline. I've put on twenty pounds since college, and I resent the two or three guys who always weigh the same. Why don't they grow up?

Unable to find anything incriminating, all I could do was to type up a report showing the ways in which I had doublechecked the Pomerance investigation written some fourteen months earlier. I hadn't added a single significant thing, which would be a great relief to my client but gave me a slight depression. My normal fee is a lot higher than Pomerance's, one of the reasons why we subcontract some footwork and research matters to him; for the price difference my clients ought to get something better from me.

Miss Weskitt took up my handwritten notes to type into her computer and browsing through them said, "Are you really convinced that Mr. Gaines is as good as your report makes him out? I mean, after all, Ray, your experience tells

you that no one this rich can be this good."

"The Bible merely says that it is difficult for a rich man to get to heaven, not that it's impossible."

"Doesn't it say, 'For a camel to pass through the eye of a needle?' That's impossible."

"The translation of the word 'camel,' someone told me, should have been 'rope.' The point is that it's difficult, not impossible."

"Camel or rope is impossible. There's something wrong here—you just haven't found it. For two years after college there's a gap in his bio."

"He had a series of jobs with companies no longer in business. I could spend two weeks checking it out and could only prove it true—I couldn't prove it false."

"Well, there's another year unaccounted for—one between high school and college."

"Miss Weskitt, who can really care what a high school student did? Even if it turned out he ran off with his sweetheart and abandoned her pregnant in a commune in California! That's gossip or scandal. I won't dig that up. You wouldn't want me to include the misconduct of an eighteen-year-old in my report, would you?"

She sniffed, getting a little huffy with me, and walked out

of the room saying, "If you're going to make a moral point out of lack of thoroughness . . ." I heard the ellipsis in her steps.

She had made her point. Miss Weskitt usually does, not always in the most tactful way. I supposed it mattered that a great student did not proceed immediately to college. It almost always meant that the person was trying to earn some money or was traveling or had been drafted, but it was the one year I hadn't bothered much about.

Dallas was off my beaten track. I went through my list of professional investigators working out of that area and luckily found a name familiar to me. Jeff Carter and I had drunk a few beers at a convention of the American Association of Security Investigators in Chicago. I called him and explained what kind of information I wanted and how fast I wanted it, and he promised to get a man to fax it to me by the afternoon.

And he was true to his word. By three o'clock, I was looking at the South Fannin County high school dossier of young Manfred Gaines, including a couple of glowing letters of recommendation to go along with his excellent grades. And in the yearbook, next to his smiling face, was a whole list of achievements and organizations: Dean's Honor

Roll three years, Dean's Special List senior, math medal, social studies honors, managing editor of the school paper, science club president, all-state halfback in his last year—a lot of very good things for the alert, handsome, and determined young man shyly gazing at me in academic gown. There was all the promise of a potential achiever, perhaps what one might have expected of Manfred Gaines, the self-made multimillionaire, with one slight discrepancy: the face in the cap and gown was not Manfred Gaines's.

Sitting in my office, gazing at some of the eight million stories in the naked city below, I felt both relieved and disturbed. I thought about the possible motives for an eighteen-year-old to change his identity—and what lengths he would have to go to to retain his new identity and shed his old one. Manfred, according to his official corporate bio, which Pomerance had accepted as plausibly accurate, had listed himself as having been brought up by an aunt and uncle, simple smalltime farmers, now deceased, after his parents had died in an automobile crash when he was five. Very convenient. At least it was convenient if you did not have to document your past until you were long past it.

People change names all the time trying to get away from something or just trying to become lost. But few people permanently take on the identity of someone else—unless that person is dead. Manfred Gaines went to college in New Jersey, which is pretty far from high school in Texas, but you never know when you might run into someone from the old hometown. Or do you?

I needed to go to the small town of Dorlin, Texas, to find out about the real Manfred Gaines who lived there thirty-eight years ago. That meant, of course, that this investigation was now essentially on me. I had contracted to work only a week, signaling in advance that I didn't expect to find anything—and that was fine with my client. But I couldn't let it rest at that—let it go with the mystery hanging on the shoulders of Mr. Gaines, the town tycoon buying respectability so long after he did something worth hiding.

There is such a thing as hard work and drudgery in the detective business, but sometimes that's countered by the unexpected detail you come across that illuminates the whole case. I went to Dorlin to search through town records and find people who might tell me what happened to Manfred Gaines, where he was now. But I found

him right away—I found him as I drove a rented Taurus forty miles north of the Dallas airport listening to some Sinatra tapes I always keep packed with my travel kit.

The town looked as if it had known better days, but not recently. The main street was the usual barbershop, dry goods, hardware mecca you'd find in most American small towns, but there were more people lounging about than you'd expect, and a few empty shop windows. The recession had hit hard, brought some farmers into town and given the whole place an air of tough times. And there was Manfred Gaines, right in the middle of it.

That is, his name and likeness—a bronzed plaque taken from that high school yearbook picture right over a park gate about a hundred yards past the marker that read "Dorlin, incorporated in 1906." It was a small municipal park, nothing spectacular, just some benches and trees and a children's play area, swings and seesaws. The sign over the gate said: "The Manfred Gaines Memorial Park."

I had come a long way to find this, and I was saddened by the journey's implication. I parked the car and got out. There was no monument in the park itself, no information about who Gaines had been—but surely he

had died shortly after graduation or that picture had been the last good one they could find of him.

Dorlin, a town of fewer than two thousand people, seemed mostly black, judging by the people I could see walking along the four blocks of the main drag, till I came upon a white policeman sitting in his patrol car. He directed me to the town library around the corner, told me to hurry because it was closing at four o'clock. It was only three now, but I scampered off anyway, eager to find a local history or a local historian.

"Mrs. Jessica Curtis, Librarian," the nameplate on the counter read. I was scrutinized with some suspicion by the trim, middle-aged black woman presiding over the small library, keeping the three young readers near her desk under tight rein as they thumbed through piles of picture books. Dorlin was off the tourist's route, and why would a white man be particularly curious about the young black man's likeness over the gates of its small park?

"Is it a town secret?" I asked.

"No secret at all. It's just an old story that I don't remember so well. The park was named after a very popular young man hereabouts from a good family who died just after he graduated from high school. He had

won several college scholarships and obviously had a bright future. The park didn't have a name then, and using his seemed a way of our remembering him. That was nearly forty years ago."

"How did he die?"

"An automobile crash." Mrs. Curtis seemed reluctant to provide any further details. After clearing her throat, she added this: "Manfred was a passenger in a car driven by a friend late at night. The boys were returning from a graduation party."

"Sad story. But since it happened so long ago, I don't understand your hesitation to recount it, even to a stranger. It makes me think there was a little more to it than that. Were the two boys doing something wrong?"

"Mister, your interest doesn't seem to be so casual."

Then I identified myself, showed her my New York license, and waited for it to settle in.

"What are you investigating, Mr. Private Detective?"

"My client wants to stay out of this. It's just a background check on someone who may have known Manfred Gaines. I can't mention any names—Miss Librarian."

She grinned at that. "What does it matter now," she said, but not to me—she was remembering the event for herself, really reminding herself of what happened. She didn't speak right away, and I waited in a deep silence for her to resume.

She shrugged and said, "The party that Manfred Gaines and Kirby Roper left had been at my house. The boys had drunk more beer than they could handle. They started getting a little wild, throwing stuff around, furniture pillows, things like that. Finally, at one point Kirby, standing behind me, put his hand over my eyes and said something like guess who, and he kissed me on the cheek. There was no malice in the boy—nothing was meant by it—but my father came into the room just at that moment and thought Kirby was getting physical with me. Papa felt it was incumbent upon him as a pretty straitlaced member of the church board to throw Kirby out of the house. The boy was so embarrassed and angry when my father pushed him onto the porch he just stamped his foot and shouted inside, demanding Manny leave with him.

"Kirby got into my father's car parked in the driveway, and Manny went right after him, I think maybe to try to

reason with him. Oh, it was not really a stealing crime—it was like a joke of sorts. Kirby just wanted to make Papa mad by parking the car across town. The tragedy was that my father saw them driving off and called the police. The police caught up with them in about ten minutes, and they panicked. Kirby heard the police siren and took off right into a tree. He came out of it with hardly a scratch, but Manfred was critically injured, in a coma, and died a couple of days later. So two lives were destroyed. It was thirty-eight years ago. No one ever forgot it."

"What happened to Kirby Roper?"

"Drunken driving, nothing more. No one wanted to prosecute him, but he spent three months in prison anyway."

"Does he live here in town?"

"He didn't come back when he was released. He lived here with some family, cousins, but had no strong ties since both his parents had died several years before that—in a car accident in another state. I think Kirby was last heard from working migrant labor in California. I don't know anything more about him, whether he's living or not. He broke his ties with this town, and nobody blamed him for that, though some people blamed him for be-

ing a bad influence on Manfred. You want to know about Manfred? Well, he was just a star athlete and brilliant student, and a lot of us in this town were expecting great things from him—he was going off to Harvard on an academic scholarship. He was going to be a lawyer, a doctor, a senator. Who knows?"

"A Harvard scholarship. Yes, he certainly was a promising young man."

"He had several scholarship offers because he was quite an athlete, too. He could have chosen Yale. A lot of state universities offered him scholarships."

"Remember which universities?"

"Why in the world would that matter now? He never got to go to any of them. Mr. Lowery, that boy's name is preserved today over the gate of a little park in a little town. Manfred Gaines might have gone on to be somebody, to achieve something the whole town could have rooted for just the way we rooted for him on the football field. But it was one of those things—a tragedy."

"You didn't answer my question."

"About the scholarships. How should I remember?"

"I think you might, if you tried, because you were inter-

ested in Manfred. Everybody in town remembers him, but you . . . you never forgot him."

She looked at me as if she were prepared to argue the distinction, whatever it meant, thought better of it, and didn't even bother to deny it. In fact, I saw a softening smile as she turned her head away. There was a silence while she sought after a vague memory. Finally, when I had about given up on hearing an answer, she said, "I know Stanford, for sure, and Columbia, and maybe Rutgers."

"Rutgers is a pretty good school, but it doesn't have quite the prestige of the others. I wonder why he applied."

"A black boy from a small Texas high school? He didn't think he'd get scholarships to those prestigious places, and he needed to get one to go anywhere. When he got scholarships from all of them, he had a tough time deciding where to go. I don't see what your point is."

"When he turned down Stanford or Columbia, they just offered his scholarship to someone else. When he turned down Rutgers, that school might have held it open for him for the following year, if he wrote and requested a reconsideration a few months later."

"But of course he didn't."

"But he did. Manfred Gaines got his Rutgers scholarship a year later, and graduated four years after that."

"What are you saying, Mr. Lowery?"

"I'm saying, Mrs. Curtis, that somebody pretending to be Manfred Gaines used his Rutgers scholarship the following year. It would have to have been somebody around Manfred's age who knew what had happened and had the nerve to try and get away with it. I'd say Kirby Roper was the natural suspect."

"Kirby was basically a good boy—he was a loyal friend. He wouldn't take advantage that way. His best friend, and he was responsible for his death."

"Think about it, Mrs. Curtis. He had the opportunity. Manfred was gone, and Kirby needed to get away from this town. Just tell me whether he was a good enough student to get through college."

"Well, as much as I can remember, he never had any problems with his classes. We did homework together, all of us in that group, including Manny, and I helped Kirby a little in English, and he helped me a little in math. And Manny helped both of us. Kids like Kirby today always go on to college, but a poor black student thirty-eight years ago, he

would have gone to work. I was able to go because of family support, but all Kirby had were cousins, and none of them went on."

"But maybe Kirby found his way—with the money given him through Manfred's scholarship. He took a chance, and he made it. I've seen the Rutgers transcript—a B-plus average, dean's list—hard work, I say, real determination."

Mrs. Curtis was thinking it through. She didn't try to make a case for Kirby Roper. She just wondered. "He never came back here. His relatives passed away or moved. If he really managed to steal Manny's identity, I hope he did well with it. I mean, I'd hate to learn he ended up sweeping a city's streets. Do you know anything of his whereabouts?"

I didn't want to say much more. After all, it was still quite possible that North Tracton's Manfred Gaines was not Kirby Roper. And even if he was, it wasn't up to me to determine what my client was going to do with the gift Gaines had offered. I didn't want to get the gossip going in a Texas town that would lead back to North Tracton.

"Maybe the boy who disappeared did well enough, Mrs. Curtis, but obviously he didn't want it known around here."

"Have you seen him?"

"I've never met him, Mrs. Curtis, but I know he's alive."

"Why are you looking for him?"

"I'm not. My client knows where Gaines is; he's just doing a background check on him. But you'll have to excuse me for leaving it at that. This is one of those times when a private investigator has to act like a priest. It's confidential. I just needed some history about this town."

"Well, I think I gave it to you, like a good town librarian. Although it's public record, maybe you could have given me some more in return. I don't know what I should say or do about Kirby Roper, and I hope I didn't get him to lose a good position somewhere, but if you get in touch with him, why don't you tell him to call me: my maiden name is Jessica Brown—he'll remember."

I wasn't so certain that he'd want to. So I took away with me some Xeroxes of a front-page story that ran in the *Fannin County Courier-Times* thirty-eight years ago. There was a picture in it of a car smashed into a tree, and another picture—the graduation picture of Manfred Gaines. And, yes, next to it, the graduation picture of the young man who would grow up to become Manfred Gaines.

It read, "Kirby Roper, driver of the vehicle, arrested at the scene."

North Tracton, New York, wasn't much larger than Dorlin, Texas, but it looked more prosperous, an obvious fact attributable to the only citizen whose life linked the two small towns. The prosperity, engendered by the man who had deserted his Texas town to spread his philanthropy here in North Tracton, was pretty obvious from where I stood on Main Street watching the brisk business in the five and dime and the three banks and the coffee shops. The library, also on Main Street, was a new glass structure, about twice the size of the one in Dorlin, and it lent CD's and videocassettes as well as books. I didn't go inside. Instead, I got back in my car and drove to the American Standard Footware factory about three miles away.

The factory was an immense building that I had to circle twice before I figured out which entrance was the one for the execs. The visitors' parking lot was nearby. There was a Mercedes parked in the reserved slot closest to that entrance. I was surprised that the license plate didn't read "Gaines" or "Manfred," but just a bunch of numbers like mine.

The offices of the president of American Standard Footware were in keeping with the building. Each of the five senior vice presidents I noted on the directory had ground floor offices buffered between the reception area and Gaines's suite. It would have been hard to get in to see him on a private matter if I hadn't had with me an envelope marked "Confidential," with his name on it and my card in it along with a copy of the Fannin County *Courier-Times* story. I gave it to a secretary, and five minutes later he walked into the reception area alone, halting thirty feet away to stare at me. I was the only visitor, the only one staring at him.

He signaled for me to follow him back to his office, which I did through a richly paneled corridor, neither of us saying a word. As we walked through a suite of offices, he told another secretary to hold calls and appointments till he spoke to her. Finally, at the last office, he held the door open for me to pass through and closed it behind him. It was much cosier than I had expected, but stylishly done. All of the chairs looked plushly comfortable. The room had a small conference table and an enviable mahogany desk. The desk was neat, uncluttered, and con-

tained a family photograph that looked as if it had been taken for the cover of *People*: the Gaineses, three children, a beautiful, loving wife, a handsome, protective father, a white mansion in the background. Where the hell was the dog?

"We can speak now without interruption, Mr. Lowery" were the first words he said. They were commanding and coldly unemotional. "Please take a seat. There are coffee and cookies just behind you." He went over himself and poured a cup, politely offering it to me. I declined. I chose to sit on a small sofa.

Gaines didn't exude any of the "How did I ever get to this position?" attitude that some corporate people do, who might have climbed to the top right over the bodies of their early collaborators. He was clearly used to setting his own agendas and controlling them, even in adversarial situations as he surely figured that our confrontation was likely to be. Tall and surprisingly lean as he was, I recognized the kind of hardness of body that comes from compulsive working out in a gym—for I was that way myself, but I was nearly fifteen years younger than he was. He had penetrating eyes, and his face threw out an odd mixture

of responses: he seemed at the same time both sad and angry.

"Your card, Mr. Lowery, says 'private investigations.' Is that a polite term for extortion?"

"Extortion? Don't jump the gun, Mr. Gaines, or should I call you Mr. Roper?"

"I changed my name legally to Manfred Gaines twenty years ago. You come here out of the blue with a document that anyone in my situation has to assume is an opening to a very unpleasant negotiation. I said extortion, but I'll apologize in advance if that's not the case. Go ahead, make your presentation."

"I've got a whole routine of funny patter that I can try out later if you get bored. Meanwhile, don't express your uneasiness by suggesting blackmail."

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he sipped his coffee and seemed to be looking out the window, though not looking at anything. I wasn't going to break the silence. Finally, he said, almost as in a monologue: "I always expected someday someone would come right into my office and point to me. But in dreams it wasn't a detective, wasn't anyone connected with the matter of law, but rather someone like Mr. Johanson."

"Mr. Johanson?"

"He was my high school principal. In a small Texas school, you get to know the authority figures pretty well. He liked me—he wanted me to do well, was even talking about helping me out so that I could get to a state college. That wasn't ordinary, you see. I was just a penniless Negro boy, with no particular distinctions or skills, and this white man, a towering man, was always asking me how I was getting along. All I was, I suppose, was the best friend of his protégé, another black boy, but one with extraordinary abilities, the star of the whole school."

"That would have been Manfred Gaines—the original Manfred Gaines."

"Yes, the original."

"I was in Dorlin, Texas, yesterday, and the librarian told me the story, with some prodding."

"Mrs. Lucas? No, of course not—she'd be over a hundred years old now."

"Mrs. Curtis is the librarian now. By the way, she sends you her regards. When you went to high school with her, she was Jessica Brown."

He knew the name instantly. The recollection of her brought the first smile to his face, brief as it was. "Yes, Jessica loved books, and she was smart enough to become the librarian. I hope she's doing well, but she's the type of person who would always be do-

ing well at anything she wanted to try. Just what did she tell you?"

"Pretty much what's in the newspaper. Also, she said that the incident was touched off by your run-in with her father at their house."

He shook his head negatively, but he wasn't disagreeing, just acknowledging an unhappy memory. "I had a couple of beers at a graduation party, and I got a little boisterous, at least for the respectable side of town where the Browns lived. I grabbed her and kissed her on the cheek. It would've been laughed off if the party were on my side of town, where beer was the commodity of teenage life. Anyway, Mr. Brown was doing a good job of chaperoning that party from upstairs, and he stormed down and threw me out. Considering the codes of the town, I deserved it all right, but it was embarrassing. I didn't have much going for me then, so I couldn't just pass it off. I was mad, even though I knew damned well it was my fault. So as soon as I hit the street, I walked right over to Mr. Brown's Chevy in the driveway. Mr. Brown, like most people in Dorlin, left his keys in the car, and I started it up. Manny came running off the porch when he saw what I was doing and jumped into the passenger seat

as I started moving. All the way he tried to get me to turn back. But if I was embarrassed by being told to leave the house, I would've been destroyed by returning the car right away. All I intended to do was park it on Main Street so as to make Mr. Brown walk to work the next day. I wasn't thinking."

"Well, you sure did some thinking later on. You figured out a way of benefiting from the whole mess."

"The mess that was my life. Consider that, Mr. Lowery, before you begin to classify me. I did three months in prison for the accident, and I guess I got off pretty easy. But it lives with me that my best friend was killed trying to prevent me from making a fool of myself. You know, the whole irony of it is that I probably would have spent twice that much time for grand theft auto if there hadn't been any accident. The judge took into consideration the 'psychological anguish' I was supposed to have felt over being responsible for the death of Manfred Gaines. I was so numb then and so scared, I didn't have much time for feeling anything. My friend was dead, and my life in that part of the country was ruined. When I got out of prison, some of my friends shunned me because Manfred had been their friend, too. And no one wanted to give

me a job. I pretty much hid out for a year on my uncle's ranch, just killing time. While I was in prison, I had worked out a plan for taking Manny's place. You're a private investigator, so I suppose you can figure out the rest of the story."

"Yeah. You became Manfred Gaines and did pretty well. His identity got you a college degree and a career, and today you're on the top of the world: like Manfred was to Dorlin, Texas, you're the hero to North Tracton, New York."

"Who are you working for, Mr. Lowery? I must know if I am to proceed with you on a confidential basis."

"I'm already working on a confidential basis, Mr. Gaines. It's not my client who's the source of the problem, and it's not extortion that's the topic."

"What is it you want?"

That was the question I had been asking myself since I had boarded the airplane the evening before in Dallas. Sure, I too was bothered by the general complaint of mankind: there doesn't seem to be enough justice to go around in this world. Not for the kid with his face on a park plaque in an obscure Texas town—nor for the multimillionaire standing across from me. And I didn't have the brains or the right to be any dispenser of justice. I had locked up my li-

censed guns a couple of years ago for exactly that reason.

Now in terms of the specifics, Kirby Roper had gotten away with fraud—he had taken money under false pretenses from a state university, which might have been legally punishable some thirty years ago, but what did it matter now? If pressed, Manfred the Second could easily repay that theft. The only punishment I could imagine was that Rutgers might void his degree, but that seemed pretty farfetched. More likely, they would ask him to join their Board of Trustees.

Yes, there might be some minor matters still pending—like whether he violated parole, if he had been on parole, and therefore might technically still be a fugitive in Texas. It was the kind of offense, if it existed, that I wasn't going to check into, nor would the Texas attorney general. The headline in the newspaper would, of course, be damaging: "Local Millionaire Facing Extradition for Parole Violation."

No, Manfred Gaines, in his present reincarnation, was safe from everything save scandal. And why shouldn't he be? In the truest American sense, he had made his comeback, and he had stockpiled his capital and invested it. As far as I knew, he had been a solid citizen for a

long, long time. My job had been a sort of devil's advocacy—find out that he was secretly a member of the Mafia or an agent of the PLO or a dealer in illegal arms. Well, he wasn't any of those things.

I looked at the picture on the desk again. Handsome man, lovely wife, beautiful daughter, two boys eager to chase around the lawn the moment the camera had finished its clicking. I thought of all the citizens of North Tracton who could be taking family pictures this year because of the thriving shoe factory. I even thought of the hard-pressed faculty of Gardener College discovering that they were going to get maybe a small raise next year.

"Well, Mr. Lowery, I'm waiting for you to tell me what it is that I can do short of bribery and extortion. Because I'm going to tell you right now that I won't pay any. I won't go on forever being afraid of looking over my shoulder. It sure is going to cost me something, but whatever, I'm freeing myself of the past."

"Don't do that so quickly, Mr. Gaines. You're damned right not to pay any blackmailer who comes across the story. With your money, you'd never be free of him. But if you're walking around with a guilty conscience, it's between that and yourself what you can afford."

At this he seemed to get a little ruffled. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about a run-down library in Dorlin presided over by Jessica Brown Curtis. It could use not only a paint job and some real lighting, but a whole lot of new books. You might consider sending them a little gift in memory of Manfred Gaines, the original one. And if you do so, why don't you tell them it comes from Kirby Roper. A lot of people back there must remember you; you don't have to tell them who you are now—just that you've done okay in the world, that you're still around, that you've never forgotten. Whether you give Dorlin something back or not, it's not my business."

I got up, but he didn't move. As I walked past him to the door, I added: "You've got my only copy of that newspaper. My client never saw it, never will. He has no interest in Kirby Roper, and neither have I. So you're as safe today as you were yesterday and the last thirty-odd years."

"Mr. Lowery, I have to apologize . . ."

"Not to me."

"Anyway, I owe you some thanks."

"For my not being an extortionist. Don't thank me for that."

"No, Mr. Lowery, for the gift you just gave me. I understand

your suggestion about the library in Dorlin in that light—as a gift, not specially to the town, to myself.”

Then he came over to the door and we shook hands.

I never saw Manfred Gaines again, nor Dr. Thaddeus Parnell. But I reported on the telephone to Dr. Parnell and told him that Gaines was all right. In my written detailed report, I did not mention Kirby Roper or Dorlin, Texas. A few months later, I came across a news article about the magnificent gift that Gardener College received

from an anonymous source. The *Times* hinted that the donor was widely assumed to be a local businessman, but no name was mentioned.

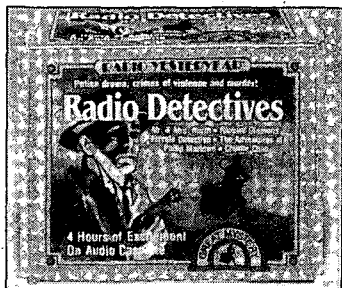
Then one day I received a phone call from Mrs. Jessica Brown Curtis. She had received a mysterious letter from Kirby Roper with a donation for a new library building. The town was overwhelmed. The check was drawn on a foreign bank, and they didn't know where Roper was or how to thank him. I said that they certainly didn't have to worry about expressing their gratitude. Just cash the check.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY “UNSOLVED”:

Bo Zeller, the saloon keeper in the green coat and black trousers, killed Dan Yafiz, the rug dealer in the khaki coat and green trousers, with the sword.

| <u>NAME</u> | <u>COAT</u> | <u>TROUSERS</u> | <u>WEAPON</u> | <u>PROFESSION</u> |
|--------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Al Xander | brown | khaki | harpoon | chandler |
| Bo Zeller | green | black | sword | saloon keeper (killer) |
| Cal Vonnegut | blue | blue | knife | sailor |
| Dan Yafiz | khaki | green | pistol | rug dealer (victim) |
| Ed Wilson | black | brown | blackjack | undertaker |

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery

by James Thurber



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Illustration by Hank Blaustein

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the motorcycle cop came roaring up, unexpectedly, out of Never-Never Land (the way motorcycle cops do), the man was on his hands and knees in the long grass beside the road, barking like a dog. The woman was driving slowly along in a car that stopped about eighty feet away; its headlights shone on the man: middle-aged, bewildered, sedentary. He got to his feet.

"What's goin' on here?" asked the cop. The woman giggled. Cock-eyed, thought the cop. He did not glance at her.

"I guess it's gone," said the man. "I—ah—could not find it."

"What was it?"

"What I lost?" the man squinted, unhappily. "Some—some cufflinks; topazes set in gold." He hesitated: the cop didn't seem to believe him. "They were the color of a fine Moselle," said the man. He put on a pair of spectacles which he had been holding in his hand. The woman giggled.

"Hunt things better with ya glasses off?" asked the cop. He pulled his motorcycle to the side of the road to let a car pass. "Better pull over off the concrete, lady," he said. She drove the car off the roadway.

"I'm nearsighted," said the man. "I can hunt things at a distance with my glasses on, but I do better with them off if I am close to something." The cop kicked his heavy boots through the grass where the man had been crouching.

"He was barking," ventured the lady in the car, "so that I could see where he was." The cop pulled his machine up on its standard; he and the man walked over to the automobile.

"What I don't get," said the officer, "is how you lose ya cufflinks a hundred feet in front of where ya car is; a person usually stops his car *past* the place he loses somethin', not a hundred feet before he gits to the place."

The lady laughed again; her husband got slowly into the car, as if he were afraid the officer would stop him any moment. The officer studied them.

"Been to a party?" he asked. It was after midnight.

"We're not drunk, if that's what you mean," said the woman, smiling. The cop tapped his fingers on the door of the car.

"You people didn't lose no topazes," he said.

"Is it against the law for a man to be down on all fours beside a road, barking in a perfectly civil manner?" demanded the lady.

"No, ma'am," said the cop. He made no move to get on his motorcycle, however, and go on about his business. There was just the quiet chugging of the cycle engine and the auto engine, for a time.

"I'll tell you how it was, officer," said the man, in a crisp, new tone. "We were settling a bet. Okay?"

"Okay," said the cop. "Who won?" There was another pulsing silence.

"The lady bet," said her husband, with dignity, as though he were explaining some important phase of industry to a newly hired clerk. "The lady bet that my eyes would shine like a cat's do at night, if she came upon me suddenly close to the ground alongside the road. We had passed a cat, whose eyes gleamed. We had passed several persons, whose eyes did *not* gleam—"

"Simply because they were above the light and not under it," said the lady. "A man's eyes would gleam like a cat's if people were ordinarily caught by headlights at the same angle as cats are." The cop walked over to where he had left his motorcycle, picked it up, kicked the standard out, and wheeled it back.

"A cat's eyes," he said, "are different than yours and mine. Dogs, cats, skunks, it's all the same. They can see in a dark room."

"Not in a *totally* dark room," said the lady.

"Yes, they can," said the cop.

"No, they can't; not if there is no light at all in the room, not if it's absolutely *black*," said the lady. "The question came up the other night; there was a professor there and he said there must be at least a ray of light, no matter how faint."

"That may be," said the cop, after a solemn pause, pulling at his gloves. "But people's eyes don't shine—I go along these roads every night an' pass hundreds of cats and hundreds of people."

"The people are never close to the ground," said the lady.

"I was close to the ground," said her husband.

"Look at it this way," said the cop. "I've seen wildcats in *trees* at night, and *their* eyes shine."

"There you are!" said the lady's husband. "That proves it."

"I don't see how," said the lady. There was another silence.

"Because a wildcat in a tree's eyes are higher than the level of a man's," said her husband. The cop may possibly have followed this, the lady obviously did not, neither one said anything. The cop got on his machine, raced his engine, seemed to be thinking about something, and throttled down. He turned to the man.

"Took ya glasses off so the headlights wouldn't make ya glasses shine, huh?" he said.

"That's right," said the man. The cop waved his hand, triumphantly, and roared away. "Smart guy," said the man to his wife, irritably.

"I still don't see where the wildcat proves anything," said his wife. He drove off slowly.

"Look," he said. "You claim that the whole thing depends on how *low a cat's* eyes are; I—"

"I didn't say that; I said it all depends on how *high a man's* eyes . . ."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Fans of James McClure's South African police procedurals should note that **The Song Dog** is now out in paperback (Mysterious Press, \$4.99). This is a prequel, recounting the case on which Lieutenant Tromp Kramer and his native sergeant Mickey Zondi first collaborated. The year is 1962; the place is a small town in northern Zululand. *The Song Dog* opens with a bang—literally—leaving two dead, one of them a local policeman named Kritzinger. The dust from the blast barely settles on the scene before Kramer, the investigating officer sent from the Trekkersburg Murder Squad, begins turning up anomalies. Kramer's investigative style is aggressive, often boorish, and notoriously quirky, yet he has a reputation of being darned good at his job. Not until he shares his pieces of the puzzle with Zondi, however, does a suspicion begin to emerge, a suspicion that will shock Kramer as much as it did the last policeman on the case. And who was that? Kritzinger, of course.

In **Orchestrated Death** by Cynthia Harrod-Eagles (Avon, \$4.50), a young violinist has been murdered, her body stripped and abandoned in an empty flat. As an investigator with one of London's homicide teams, Slider has seen hundreds of similar victims. But no one had even missed Anne-Marie Austen, nor is anyone ever likely to again. Is that why this case haunts the seasoned detective? Or is it, perhaps, that Slider is falling in love with one of the victim's fellow musicians, which makes the death of a young woman, forever unloved, seem especially tragic? The answers will change Slider's life in ways he could never have predicted. *Orchestrated Death* gives readers an insider's look at the

lives of professional musicians, and introduces several very credible and sympathetic characters.

Sharyn McCrumb won an Edgar for *Bimbos of the Death Sun*. Now professor and science fiction author Jay Omega returns, again ably assisted by Dr. Marion Farley, his significant other. **Zombies of the Gene Pool** (Ballantine, \$4.99) revolves around an intriguing premise. Thirty years ago a group of aspiring S-F writers lived together for one summer. At its conclusion, they buried a time capsule, and each included an original story. Soon a government project flooded the valley, and the young writers went their separate ways, several to fame and fortune. Now they're getting together again. They've invited the press to the reunion to witness the exhumation of their capsule, and publishers to bid on the "best-seller" the collected stories promise to become. There's more buried than a mere manuscript, however, and someone will kill to keep it secret. As always, McCrumb writes with great wit and includes super insider's stuff about the very closed world of S-F aficionados.

At Sea is a first mystery for award-winning author Toby Olson (Simon & Schuster, \$19), and it's a solid debut. It somberly explores themes of loss and love, and trust disastrously misplaced. Provincetown cop Peter Stavely is assigned to an ugly rape case. Not only was Beth Charters terrorized in her own home by two unknown assailants, but they're threatening to return. Stavely, meanwhile, is also receiving threats. His are from the family of a local man he killed during a drug bust. On the personal side, his wife can no longer tolerate his infidelity and his drinking. She is threatening to leave him. Olson's characters are complex and compelling, and his Cape Cod landscapes are painted with a poet's command of the language.

George Cuomo's **Trial by Water** (Random House, \$21) offers readers the pleasures of a big, cinematic novel (the theme of class tension in smalltown America, a large cast, and an extended time period capped with a dramatic trial) with the suspense of a mystery reminiscent of *Presumed Innocent*. Prom night is a serious transition to adulthood for the kids of Medway, a small blue-collar town. Most will immediately move on to marriage and jobs. In the wealthy bedroom community near Medway, however, the prom has been turned into "MORP Night." Two teenagers will die before the night is over, and Florian Rubio—father of the boy standing trial for their murder—will never be the same again.

British author Gillian Linscott has chosen World War I as her period and a suffragette as her heroine in the sequel to *Sister*

Beneath the Sheet titled **Hanging on the Wire** (St. Martin's, \$17.95). Nell Bray's friend Jenny works at a British countryside clinic that employs the very modern techniques of Sigmund Freud to treat shellshocked veterans sent there to recuperate. Jenny is concerned that several recent pranks—which Jenny believes the work of a fanatical neighbor—will end in tragedy. Can Nell prove the latter the perpetrator? Linscott's period details add greatly to the enjoyment of this whodunit, which gives us a spunky feminist in an era that respected neither in its "flowers of womanhood."

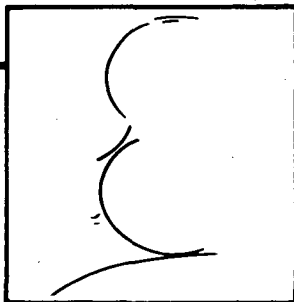
Elizabeth George continues to enthrall readers with her British police series. **Missing Joseph** is the latest (Bantam, \$21.95), and it will not disappoint fans. St. James and his wife are on holiday. They impulsively chose a Lancashire village as a result of an invitation from a vicar whom Deborah only recently met in London. On arrival, they learn that the vicar has been poisoned. The inquest ruled it accidental, but St. James has the strongest doubts. Strong enough to call in his friend Thomas Lynley of Scotland Yard.

"Welcome to Medmelton, where women have strange eyes, people protect murderers from the police and witchcraft is still practised. It must make London seem quite safe." This is the setting for Robert Richardson's latest Augustus Maltravers mystery, **The Lazarus Tree** (St. Martin's, \$17.95). Richardson has set the stage with a very closeknit, centuries-old village, a tree with a curse, and a string of unexplained incidents. Enter Gus Maltravers, the urbane and sophisticated London playwright with a nose for sleuthing. The result is suspenseful entertainment.

Lately the senior citizen sleuth has several fictional biographers more contemporary than Agatha Christie and her Miss Marple. Corinne Holt Sawyer, Sister Carol Anne O'Marie, and B. J. Oliphant come immediately to mind. Now Susanna Hofmann McShea enters with **Hometown Heroes** (Avon, \$4.99), a cosy that not only unites four interesting over-fifty characters, but also places them in a quaint New England town. Mildred Bennett has returned to Raven's Wing on the heels of being asked for a divorce by her long time philandering husband. She intends to rest and compose herself. She certainly never intends to take in an irascible old ex-sheriff as an invalided houseguest, or to take on Forrest Haggarty's obsession with a serial killer that he insists has menaced Raven's Wing for forty years. With the aid of a widow and a local doctor, Mildred catches a killer and comes into her own.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Amy Fisher, move over. If you thought Hollywood's obsession with teen obsession had run its course, think again. The three TV flicks on the Long Island girl whose foreplay and gunplay with the Buttafuoco family are now infamous may have been the start of a trend.

Although **The Crush** isn't based on a true story, it certainly looks as if it were inspired by the endless saga of Amy and Joey and Mary Jo. If only it were inspiring itself.

The big screen Amy-disciple is the auburn-haired Darian, a pouty fourteen-year-old obsessed with the cute guy who moves into the guest house behind her parents' Tudor mansion. That's the crux of *The Crush*. Cary Elwes is Nick, a Hemingway wannabe who, at twenty-eight, has snared a job

with the trendy *Pique* magazine. And what budding teenage girl wouldn't go for this writer?

In addition to his carefully cultivated casual look, complete with ever-present jeans, occasional stubble, and tortoiseshell glasses that make him look like a guy who looks thoughtful, Nick even has a great car, an old convertible Plymouth Reliant that he's restoring. He is too cool to be believed. For our teen troublemaker, however, he's a dreamboat who has docked in her own back yard.

Initially, Nick sees her girlish attention as a harmless flirtation. But when she sneaks into his home computer, wipes out an important story, and swipes all his notes, he does become concerned. And when he discovers a secret shrine she's

built for him, he becomes a little more concerned.

He also becomes sweaty as she turns up the heat bit by bit—the clothes she wears, the way she sits, those lips, that hair . . . At one point, he winds up hidden in her closet as she undresses; he's practically reduced to a bowl of Jell-O.

Along the way, Nick gets himself a girlfriend closer to his own age—Amy, a photographer for the magazine. But nothing will stand in Darian's way, not even another woman.

In one of the more original scenes in a film crowded with clichéd images, Darian sends a hive full of wasps into Amy's darkroom, via the air vents. While the wasps do their damage, the scene dissolves into a photo of Darian darkening to black in a developing tray.

Unfortunately, much of the scene's effectiveness is compromised when Amy reappears on screen a short time later showing no ill effect from the brutal stinging attack.

There is some suspense in *The Crush*, but it's the type that leaves you waiting for something to pop up suddenly in a dark room or leap from around a corner. In spite of such bones of suspense tossed our way, there's no need to move to the edge of your seat or

grip the arm of your date.

As Darian, newcomer Alicia Silverstone, sixteen in real life, steals what there is to steal of this picture. She's cute, she's sexy, she's frightening. She's the next Drew Barrymore.

Cary Elwes, as Nick, seems to sleepwalk through much of the film. There's simply not enough oomph to this guy. He shows only two emotions, the one with sweat and the one without. He also has two accents, one American, one British.

Alan Shapiro, the writer and director responsible for this film, could have done himself and the audience a favor by not taking himself so seriously. As a black comedy, in the mold of a movie like *Heathers*, it might have become a cult classic and more interesting. This is a story, after all, in which the lead character, Darian, has a lifesized, working carousel in her attic, built with loving care by her father. Sure, it's wacky, but it's an unusual, baroque touch. And *The Crush* even comes complete with a light-house scene, something no thriller seems to be without today.

More such details would have added up to fewer trips to the refreshment stand to refill the popcorn box.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo-Norman E. Glovsky of Ash-mentions go to Ed Waymire Ryan of Lansdale, Pennsylv- of Penn Valley, California; ensboro, Kentucky; T. H. Margaret Boucher of New York, New York; Jimmy L. Austin of West Hartford, Connecticut; Rose Tucker of Burlington, Massachusetts; Linda Harvey of Flagstaff, Arizona; Geraldine Davis of Prescott, Arizona; Norman D. Maroney of Reno, Nevada; John Podulka of Glen Ellyn, Illinois; and Barbara Fay Mitchell of Binghamton, New York.



tograph contest was won by land, Wisconsin. Honorable of Lincoln, Nebraska; Paul vania; Walter Patrick Smith Beverly Taylor Herald of Ow- Keffer of Homer, Arkansas;

FOR SALE BY OWNER by Norman E. Glovsky

"But are you sure you want to sell the old place?"

"I sure do. I just can't stand it any more."

"Just because the folks caused a ruckus?"

"A ruckus, I could take. Y'know, when I gave them rights to the place, I figured their God-given common sense and decency would help keep them on the straight and narrow. But lately they're into every crime in the book—and a few even I never thought of."

"I can't believe they're that bad."

"Believe it. Murder, child abuse, rape, carjacking, all types of dishonesty and fraud . . . their criminal activity runs the gamut."

"Still, while there's even a small hope for improvement, it's a shame to put that 'For Sale By Owner' sign on the church."

"Church? I didn't want the sign put on the church, Saint Peter. I wanted it put on the planet," said the Almighty.

Photo by Curt Fischer

(continued from page 4)

BEST NOVEL OF 1992:

Bootlegger's Daughter by Margaret Maron (Mysterious Press)

Backhand by Liza Cody (Perfect Crime)

32 Cadillacs by Joe Gores (Mysterious Press)

White Butterfly by Walter Mosley (Norton)

Pomona Queen by Kem Nunn (Pocket Books)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR OF 1992:

The Black Echo by Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)

Trail of Murder by Christine Andrae (St. Martin's)

Trick of the Eye by Jane Stanton Hitchcock (Dutton)

Ladystinger by Craig Smith (Crown)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF 1992:

A Cold Day for Murder by Dana Stabenow (Berkley)

The Good Friday Murder by Lee Harris (Fawcett)

Principal Defense by Gini Hartzmark (Ivy)

Shallow Graves by William Jefferies (Avon)

Night Cruise by Billie Sue Mosiman (Jove)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1992:

"Mary, Mary, Shut the Door" by Ben Schutz

(Deadly Allies/Perfect Crime)

"Candles in the Rain" by Doug Allyn (EQMM 11/92)

"Howler" by Jo Bannister (EQMM 10/92)

"Louise" by Max Allan Collins (Deadly Allies/Perfect Crime)

"One Hit Wonder" by Gabrielle Kraft (*Sisters in Crime* 5/Berkley)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1992:

A Little Bit Dead by Chap Reaver (Delacorte)

Breaking the Fall by Michael Cadnum (Viking)

The One Who Came Back by Joann Mazzio (Houghton Mifflin)

The Weekend Was Murder by Joan Lowery Nixon (Delacorte)

The Highest Form of Killing by Malcolm Rose (Harcourt)

BEST JUVENILE OF 1992:

Coffin on a Case by Eve Bunting (HarperCollins)

Susannah and the Purple Mon-goose by Patricia Elmore (Dutton)

The Treasure Bird by Peni R. Griffin (McElderry Books)

Fish and Bones by Ray Prather (HarperCollins)

The Widow's Broom by Chris Van Allsburg (Houghton Mifflin)

(continued on page 159)

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

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(continued from page 156)

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Swift Justice by Harry Farrell (St. Martin's)

The Trunk Murderess: Winnie Ruth Judd by Jana Bommersbach (Simon & Schuster)

Blood Echoes by Thomas H. Cook (Dutton)

Everything She Ever Wanted by Ann Rule (Simon & Schuster)

My Husband's Trying to Kill Me by Jim Schutze (HarperCollins)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL

STUDY OF 1992:

Alias S.S. Van Dine by John Loughery (Scribners)

Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life by David Coomes (Lion Publishing)

Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy by Jeffrey Meyers (Scribners)

Doubleday Crime Club Compendium 1928-1991 by Ellen Nehr (Offspring Press)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1992:

The Player, screenplay by Michael Tolkin (Fineline Features)

The Crying Game, screenplay by Neil Jordan (Miramax)

Unforgiven, screenplay by David Webb Peoples (Warner Bros.)

Sneakers, screenplay by Phil Alden Robinson and Law-

rence Lasker & Walter F. Parkes (Universal)

A Few Good Men, screenplay by Aaron Sorkin (Columbia)

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OF 1992:

Prime Suspect, teleplay by Lynda La Plant (Mystery!)

Honor Thy Mother, teleplay by Richard Delong Adams & Robert L. Freedman (Creative Artists)

Mrs. Cage, teleplay by Nancy Barr (American Playhouse)

Stay the Night, teleplay by Dan Freudenberger (ABC)

Burden of Proof, teleplay by John Gay (ABC)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1992:

"Conspiracy," teleplay by Michael S. Chernuchin and Rene Balcer (Law & Order, Universal)

"A Killer Book," teleplay by Paul Bernbaum (Likely Suspects, Four Point Entertainment)

"Point of View," teleplay by Walon Green and Rene Balcer (Law & Order, Universal)

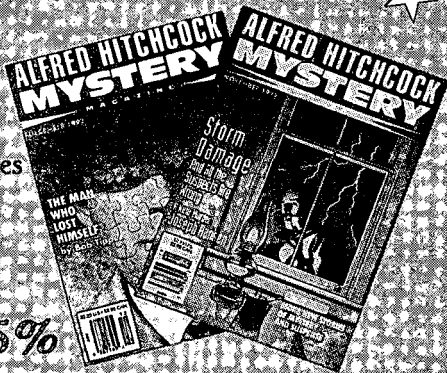
"Smells Like Teen Spirit," teleplay by William Rabkin and Lee Goldberg (Likely Suspects, Four Point Entertainment)

"The Dead File," teleplay by Tom Sawyer (Murder, She Wrote, Universal)



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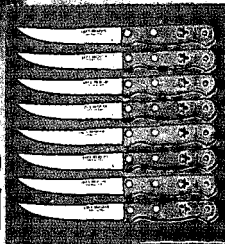
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